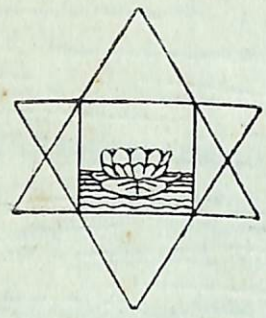


SRI AUROBINDO

LETTERS ON "SAVITRI"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Sri Aurobindo intended to write a long Introduction to *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol.* Together with one Book out of the twelve of his epic—significantly enough the Book of Death—the eagerly awaited Introduction never got written. Nothing that anybody may pen, however acute, can replace it as an expository and illuminative document on the unusual poetic afflatus—unusual both in message and music—that blows through the twenty-five thousand and odd lines of this Legend of the past that is a Symbol of the future. But luckily we have a substantial number of letters by Sri Aurobindo on what can be called, if any one achievement by so vastly and variously creative a genius can lay claim to the title, his literary life-work. Out of these letters an introductory *ensemble*—necessarily in certain places more informal, personal, unreserved, focussed on details, quick-shifting, repetitive than a specially composed piece for the public would be—has been made with the object of throwing, in the poet's own valuable words, some light on the poem's conception and development and on its qualities of inspiration, vision and technique.*

It will perhaps be of interest to touch upon the origin of the series of notes that have been compiled and presented here. No sooner did I commence my contact with Sri Aurobindo in 1927 than I found the air of his Ashram humming with rich rumours of the masterpiece that had been in progress ever since his days in Baroda. Having always had a passion for poetry and having myself tried to catch a spark of the celestial fire, I was extremely thrilled and longed to set eyes on this most significant work of his which he was repeatedly recasting to make it accord with the ever higher ascension of his own consciousness in Yoga. But Sri Aurobindo was in no hurry to show it before it reached the intensest spiritual perfection. It was I, on the contrary, who kept showing him my own little efforts at expressing the few strange glimmers of beauty and truth that at times my discipleship under so gracious a spiritual and literary guru brought me. On one such

*Some of the more general letters—whole or in part—have already appeared in "Letters of Sri Aurobindo" (Third Series). But as they are linked up with the kind of poetry that "Savitri" is and as they were actually written with direct or indirect reference to this poem, their most significant place is in the same setting as those treating of particular points. Among the latter, one or two short entries are included not so much because they illustrate anything in the poem as because the have either a flavour of personality or some other psychological bearing. The letters have been divided into sections, each section determined mostly by similarity of theme in its contents or by their broad subsumableness under a common head. The order of the sections—and sometimes also that of their contents—is dictated by two considerations. One is semi-logical sequence; the other is textual reference—that is, passages that allude to something in other passages have to come later and certain remarks must be on later pages because, without this being so, their exact sense may not emerge.

occasion, to illustrate some point, he sent back with his helpful comments two lines describing "the Ray from the transcendent penetrating through the mind's passive neutral reflection of the supreme quietude of the silent Brahman." They ran:

Piercing the limitless unknowable,
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.

I was struck by the profound word-reverberations that reinforced the mystical word-suggestions with a tremendous immediacy of spiritual fact. I asked where the lines came from. The reply was: "*Savitri.*"

I never forgot this first brief impact of the closely guarded secret. Even before it, Sri Aurobindo had tried to make me conscious of a certain element in poetry that hailed from what he called the Overhead planes, the hidden ranges of consciousness above the intellect, with their inherent light of knowledge and their natural experience of the infinite. He distinguished four planes: Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind. The last-named has been, according to him, the top reach of the dynamic side of man's spirituality so far: a transcendental poise of immutable Brahman or featureless Nirvana is the Beyond to it usually realised when in isolated cases there is a leap to the ultimate status of that infinite silence of self-liberation which can be attained on any plane of the cosmos by an inner withdrawal. The master dynamism of the Divine, the integral earth-transformative power which Sri Aurobindo designated as Supermind or Gnosis or Truth-Consciousness and which was his own outstanding personal realisation, rendering his Yoga a unique hope for the world, has lain unmanifest and mostly unseized and, until certain radical conditions are completely fulfilled, cannot find direct expression in life or literature. Even the expression of the Overmind with its massive and comprehensive yet intensely immediate vision—especially in the entire authenticity of its undertones and overtones of rhythm—is rare, as is also to a less degree that of the Higher Mind's broad connective clarity, the Illumined Mind's many-sided opulence of colourful insight, the Intuition's swift and close and all-seizing focus. What the ancients termed the *mantra*—the stuff of Divinity itself appearing to become revelatory scriptural word as in some parts of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita—is the clearest voice of the Overmind in its few past visitations on earth. Less openly, the Overmind is the chief presence in the world's greatest poetic phrases of various types. More and more Sri Aurobindo sought—by patiently criticising, appraising, distinguishing—to help me not only respond, in my appreciation of poetry, to the rising scale of the Overhead note but also bring some strain of it into my own verses. The quest of that note grew for me a dominant occupation and most I prayed for a touch of the Overmind.

One day, emboldened by his innumerable favours of tutorship, I made a singular request. I wrote:

"I shall consider it a favour indeed if you will give me an instance in

English of the inspiration of the pure Overmind. I don't mean just a line like Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through eternity

or Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone,

which has a brief burst of it, but something sustained and plenary. I want to steep my consciousness in its rhythm and its revelation. It will be a most cherished possession. Please don't disappoint me by saying that, as no English writer has a passage of this kind, you cannot do anything for me."

He wrote back in his characteristic vein:

"Good Heavens! how am I to avoid saying that, when it is the on'y possible answer—at least so far as I can remember? Perhaps if I went through English poetry again with my present consciousness I might find more intimations like that line of Wordsworth, but a passage sustained and plenary? These surely are things yet to come—the 'future poetry' perhaps, but not the past."

With the familiarity—almost the impudence—he permitted us, I replied:

"I think the favour I asked was expressed in perfectly clear language. If no English poet has produced the passage I want, then who has done so in English? God alone knows. But who is capable of doing it? All of us know. Well, then why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so naturally Aurobindonian as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines—even eight will more than do—all pure gold to be treasured for ever. So please...Perhaps it is possible only on Sunday—the day dedicated to golden *Surya* and rich for you with leisure from correspondence: I can wait answerless for twenty-four hours with a sweet *samata*."

The answer came the very next morning:

"I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill, how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written out of which you could select for yourself anything Overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted Overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from *Savitri,* on condition you keep them to yourself for the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter—and occasionally better."

And then with an "e.g." there followed in his own fine and sensitive yet forceful hand sixteen lines of the very first Canto of *Savitri* as it stood

then*:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone
In the unlit temple of immensity,
Lay stretched immobile upon silence' marge,
Mute with the unplumbed prevision of her change.
The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.
Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,
The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along the moment's fading brink
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

Below the quotation were the words: "There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder."

After a whole day's absorption in the absolute nectar, I sent him a note:

"Like the sample? Rather! It is useless for me to attempt thanking you. The beauty of what you have sent may move one to utterance but the wideness takes one's breath away. I read the lines over and over again. I am somewhat stunned by the magnitude and memorableness of this day: I think your description of the divine dawn can very well apply to its spiritually poetic importance for me. Perhaps you will laugh, but I had two strange feelings before writing this letter. I was reading your verses, when I had a mute sense of big tears in the heart and a conviction that having seen what I had seen I could not possibly remain a mere mortal! What do you say to my madness?"

The day of days was October 25, 1936. From then onwards, for months, Sri Aurobindo kept sending passages which I typed out and he touched up again or expanded. About the next passage I remarked:

"It goes reverberating in depth upon depth of one's being. What I admire is that the burden of infinite suggestion is carried with such a flexible ease. There is no attempt—as in the poetry of us lesser fry—to make things specially striking or strange or new, but a simple largeness of gesture which most naturally makes one surprising revelation after another of beauty and power."

His comment—intended, no doubt, for only my eyes, for in his public

*At present this prelude—slightly altered in phrase and with its opening and its close considerably separated—stands in a passage of 93 lines: "Savitri", Vol. I. pp. 3-5.

pronouncements he rarely spoke about his own work without reserve—was:

"Well, it is the difference of receiving from above and living in the ambiance of the Above—whatever comes receives the breath of largeness which belongs to that plane."

Our correspondence went on and it continued, though with several long breaks, up to almost the end. It was a correspondence with many features. All the critical appreciation and understanding I was capable of I brought to *Savitri* and all that I could write in my own manner by way of Introduction to the poem was put into the last chapter of my book *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo,* about which Sri Aurobindo was both generous and modest enough to say:" it seems to me very fine both in style and substance, but as it is in high eulogy of my own writing, you must not expect me to say more." But while I could not help eulogising most of *Savitri* with whatever analytic and imaginative apparatus was at my disposal, I did not abstain from questioning a few things here and there. Nor did Sri Aurobindo either expect or desire me to abstain. The precise character and motive of this questioning have been indicated in a footnote in the body of the selection of replies by Sri Aurobindo which I have made from my file. And the amount of fault-finding was too little for me to be ashamed of, but even so I feel that occasionally I encroached with the play of the surface intelligence overmuch on Sri Aurobindo's meagre and precious spare time. On the other hand, without that little amount and without my pressing upon his notice some unfavourable comments by an academic friend outside the Aurobindonian circle, the chance would have been missed for ever of seeing the finest critic I have known pass elucidatory judgment on the greatest poem I have read—a poem written by the most enlightened Master of Yoga and the most patient as well as considerate Superman one could hope to have the privilege to serve.

K. D. SETHNA

LETTERS ON "SAVITRI"

1

There is a previous draft of *Savitri,* the result of the many retouchings of which somebody told you; but in that form it would not have been a "*magnum opus*" at all. Besides, it would have been a legend and not a symbol. I therefore started recasting the whole thing; only the best passages or lines of the old draft will remain, altered so as to fit into the new frame.

No, I do not work at the poem once a week; I have other things to do. Once a month, perhaps, I look at the new form of the first Book and make such changes as inspiration points out to me—so that nothing shall fall below the minimum height which I have fixed for it. (1931)

* * *

Savitri is blank verse without enjambement (except rarely)—each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement, so far as that is a possibility in English. You can't take that as a model—it is too difficult a rhythm-structure to be a model. I shall myself know whether it is a success or not, only when I have finished two or three Books. But where is the time now for such a work? When the Supramental has finished coming down, then perhaps. (1932)

* * *

Don't make prophecies. How do you know that *Savitri* is or is going to be Supramental poetry? It is not, in fact—it is only an attempt to render into poetry a symbol of things occult and spiritual. (1933)

* * *

It seems as if you were facing the problem of blank verse by attempting it under conditions of the maximum difficulty. Not content with choosing a form which is based on the single line blank verse (I mean, of course, each line a clear-cut entity by itself) as opposed to the flowing and freely enjambed variety, you try to unite flow lines and single line and farther undertake a form of blank verse quatrains! I have myself tried the blank verse quatrain; even, when I attempted the single line blank

verse base on a large scale in *Savitri,* I found myself falling involuntarily into a series of four-line movement. But even though I was careful in the building, I found it led to a stiff monotony and had to make a principle of variation—one line, two line, three line, four line or longer passages (paragraphs as it were) alternating with each other; otherwise the system would be a failure.

(1933)

* * *

There is no invariable "how" in inspiration—except that I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. Formerly it used not to be so, the mind was always labouring at the stuff of an unshaped formation. My poems come as a stream, beginning at the first line and ending at the last—only some remain with one or two changes, others have to be recast if the first inspiration was an inferior one. *Savitri* is a work by itself, unlike all the others. I made some eight or ten recasts of it originally under the old insufficient inspiration. Afterwards I am altogether rewriting it, concentrating on the first Book and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection—but I have hardly any time now for such work.

(1934)

* * *

Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came, as a narrative poem in two parts, Part I Earth and Part II Beyond (these two parts are still extant in the scheme,* each of four Books—or rather Part II consisted of three Books and an epilogue)..."Twelve Books" to an epic is a classical superstition, but the new *Savitri* may extend to ten Books —if much is added in the final revision it may be even twelve.† The first Book has been lengthening and lengthening out... As for the second part, I have not touched it yet... There was no "climbing of planes" in the first version—rather Savitri moved through the worlds of Night, of Twilight, of Day—all, of course, in a spiritual sense—and ended by calling down the power of the highest worlds of Sachchidananda. I had no idea of what the Supramental World could be like at that time, so it could not enter into the scheme... As for expressing the Supramental inspiration, that is a matter of the future.

(1936)

* * *

Savitri is represented in the poem as an incarnation of the Divine Mother. The narrative is supposed to have taken place in far past times

* In the present version, there are three parts.
† As is actually the case now.

when the whole thing had to be opened, so as to "hew the ways of Immortality." (1936)

* * *

The poem was originally written from a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first Book is new or else the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover, there have been made several successive revisions, each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands, there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting any one of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence or vital towards them... It is only occasionally that it is pure Higher Mind—a mixture of the Intuitive or Illumined is usually there except when some truth has to be stated to the philosophic intelligence in as precise a manner as possible... The passage*—

Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit
Voyaging through worlds of splendour and of calm
Overflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.
Ardent was her self-poised unstumbling will;
Her mind a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
As in a mystic and dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies
Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple door to things beyond.
Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
Even in earth-stuff and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.
The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell:
Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air
Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
Spiritual that can make all things divine.

* This description of Savitri in whom the God of Love found "his perfect shrine" was subsequently expanded from its original 31 lines to 51 (Vol. I. pp. 15-16).

For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.
At once she was the stillness and the word,
A continent of self-diffusing peace,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire.
In her he met a vastness like his own,
His high warm subtle ether he refound
And moved in her as in his natural home—

this passage is, I believe, what I might call the Overmind Intuition at work, expressing itself in something like its own rhythm and language.* It is not easy to say about one's own poetry, but I think I have succeeded here and in some passages later on in catching that very difficult note; in separate lines or briefer passages (i.e. a few lines at a time) I think it comes in not unoften... There are two ranges of Overmind which might be called "mental" and "gnostic" respectively—the latter in direct touch with Supermind, the former more like a widened and massive intuition... "All in her pointed to a nobler kind"† is a connecting line which prepares for what follows. It is sometimes good technique to intersperse lines like that, provided they do not fall below standard, so as to give the intellect the foothold of a clear unadorned statement of the gist of what is coming, before taking a higher flight. This is, of course, a technique for long poems and long descriptions, not for shorter things or lyrical writing. (1936)

* * *

I do not "think" about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel for it when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I do not bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for this carries through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression, that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm—if there is a flaw in the rhythm the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If, on the other hand, the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after-exa-

* The statement was in reply to the question: "Are not these lines which I regard as the **ne plus ultra** in world-poetry a snatch of the sheer Overmind?" Considering Sri Aurobindo's remark in 1946 about his attitude ten years earlier—"At that time I hesitated to assign anything like Overmind touch or inspiration to passages in English or other poetry and did not presume to claim any of my own writing as belonging to this order"—and considering also that several lines of other poets which he had hesitated about were later adjudged by him to be from the Overmind, it seems certain that this passage which he had ascribed to the Overmind Intuition would have been traced by him to the supreme source if he had been privately asked about it again.

† This line comes just before the passage quoted.

mination and recasting of part or whole.

The things I lay most stress on are whether each line is in itself the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse); whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect but they may not combine perfectly together—bridges may be needed, alteration of position so as to create the right development and perspective. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variations of rhythm, as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold constructions of vowel and consonant sounds, alliterations, assonances, etc., distribution into one line, two line, three or four or five line, many line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence—these are the important things. But all that is usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders. If there is a defect I appeal to headquarters, till a proper version comes along or the defect is removed by a word or phrase substitute that flashes—with the necessary sound and sense. These things are not done by thinking or seeking for the right thing—the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling—the solar plexus has to be satisfied and, until it is, revision after revision has to continue. I may add that the technique does not go by any set mental rule—for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precepts but sound-significance filling out the word-significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rules. (1936)

* * *

I can never be certain of newly written stuff in *Savitri* until I have looked at it again after an interval. Apart from the quality of new lines, there is the combination with others in the whole which I have modified more than anything else in my past revisions. (1936)

* * *

Allow me to point out that whatever I did in a "jiffy" would not be any more than provisionally final. It is not a question of making a few changes in individual lines, that is a very minor problem; the real finality only comes when all is felt as a perfect whole, no line jarring with or falling away from the level of the whole though some may rise above it and also all the parts in their proper place making the right harmony. It is an inner feeling that has to decide that... Unfortunately the mind can't arrange these things, and has to wait till the absolutely right thing comes in a sort of receptive self-opening and calling-down condition. Hence the months. (1936)

* * *

It is not a question of inclination at all. There is too great a pressure to get necessary things done for the indulgence of poetic inclination to be at all possible. (1937)

* * *

I have been kept too occupied with other things to make much headway with the poem—except that I have spoilt your beautiful copy of the "Worlds" under the oestrus of the restless urge for more and more perfection; but we are here for World-improvement, so I hope that is excusable. (1938)

* * *

I have tackled the first two sections of *Savitri* again and have pulled up the third to a higher consistency of level; the "Worlds" have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements, out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty will emerge! (1938)

* * *

You will see when you get the full typescript of the first three Books that *Savitri* has grown to an enormous length so that it is no longer quite the same thing as the poem you saw some years ago. There are now three Books in the first part. The first, the Book of Beginnings, comprises five cantos which cover the same ground as what you typed but contains also much more that is new. The small passages about Aswapathi and the other worlds have been replaced by a new Book, the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, in fourteen Cantos with many thousand lines. There is also a third sufficiently long Book, the Book of the Divine Mother. In the new plan of the poem there is a second part consisting of five Books: two of these, the Book of Birth and Quest and the Book of Love, have been completed and another, the Book of Fate is almost complete. Two others, the Book of Yoga and the Book of Death, have still to be written, though a part needs only a thorough recasting. Finally, there is the third part consisting of four Books, the Book of Eternal Night, the Book of the Dual Twilight, the Book of Everlasting Day and the Return to Earth, which have to be entirely recast and the third of them largely rewritten. So it will be a long time before *Savitri* is complete.

In the new form it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster in its scope than was intended in the original poem. I am trying, of course, to keep it at a very high level of inspiration, but in so large a plan covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience there is bound to be much variation of tone: but that is, I think, necessary for the richness and completeness of the treatment. (1946)

2

Some of your criticisms* bring forward questions of the technique of mystic poetry about which I wanted to write in an introduction to *Savitri* when it is published, and I may as well say something about that here.

Rapid transitions from one image to another are a constant feature in *Savitri* as in most mystic poetry. I am not here† building a long sustained picture of the Dawn with a single continuous image or variations of the same image. I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon another. There is first a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first "beauty and wonder" leading to the magical gate and the "lucent corner." Then comes the failing of the darkness, the simile used ("a falling cloak") suggesting the rapidity of the change. Then as a result the change of what was once a rift into a wide luminous gap,—if you want to be logically consistent you can look at the rift as a slit in the "cloak" which becomes a big tear. Then all changes into a "brief perpetual sign", the iridescence, then the blaze and the magnificent aura. In such a race of rapid transitions you cannot bind me down to a logical chain of figures or a classical monotone. The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Dionysian wine than an orderly housewife.

Your "barely", instead of the finer and more suggestive "hardly" in

Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns
Outpoured the revelation and the flame,‡

falls flat upon my ear; one cannot substitute one word for another in this kind of poetry merely because it means intellectually the same thing; "hardly" is the *mot juste* in this context and, repetition or not, it must re-

* The nature of these criticisms must not be misunderstood. Just as the merits of "Savitri" were appreciated to the utmost—and this meant whole-hearted appreciation of more than ninety-nine per cent of it—whatever seemed a shortcoming no matter how slight and negligible in the midst of the abundant excellence was pointedly remarked upon so that Sri Aurobindo might not overlook anything in his work towards what he called "perfect perfection" before the poem came under the scrutiny of non-Aurobindonian critics at the time of publication. The commentator was anxious that there should be no spots on "Savitri's" sun. The purpose was also to get important issues cleared up in relation to the sort of poetry Sri Aurobindo was writing and some of his disciples aspired to write. Knowing the spirit and aim of the criticisms Sri Aurobindo welcomed them, even asked for them. On many occasions—and these provide most of the matter collected here—he vigorously defended himself, but on several he willingly agreed to introduce small changes. Once he is reported to have smiled and said: "Is he satisfied now?" Unfortunately, the opportunity to discuss every part of the poem did not arise and we have, therefore, only a limited number of psychological and technical elucidations by him of his art.

†Vol. 1, p. 5. ‡Ibid.

main unless a word not only *justé* but inevitable comes to replace it.* I am not disposed either to change "suns" to "stars" in the line about the ignorant Force

Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns.†

"Stars" does not create the same impression and brings in a different tone in the rhythm and the sense. This line and that which follows it—

And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl—

bring in a general subordinate idea stressing the paradoxical nature of the creation and the contrasts which it contains, the drowsed somnambulist as the mother of the light of the suns and the activities of life. It is not intended as a present feature in the darkness of the Night.

Again, do you seriously want me to give an accurate scientific description of the earth half in darkness and half in light so as to spoil my impressionist symbol‡ or else to revert to the conception of earth as a flat and immobile surface? I am not writing a scientific treatise. I am selecting certain ideas and impressions to form a symbol of a partial and temporary darkness of the soul and Nature which seems to a temporary feeling of that which is caught in the Night as if it were universal and eternal. One who is lost in that Night does not think of the other half of the earth as full of light; to him all is Night and the earth a forsaken wanderer in an enduring darkness. If I sacrifice this impressionism and abandon the image of the earth wheeling through dark space I might as well abandon the symbol altogether, for this is a necessary part of it. As a matter of fact in the passage itself earth in its wheeling does come into the dawn and pass from darkness into the light. You must take the idea as a whole and in all its transitions and not press one detail with too literal an insistence. In this poem I present constantly one partial view of life or another temporarily as if it were the whole in order to give full value to the experience of those who are bound by that view, as for instance, the materialist conception and experience of life, but if any one charges me with philosophical inconsistency, then it only means that he does not understand the technique of the Overmind interpretation of life.

I come next to the passage about the Inconscient waking Ignorance. In the first place, the word "formless" is indeed defective, not so much because of any repetition but because it is not the right word or idea and I was not myself satisfied with it. I have changed the passage as follows:

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,

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*Later Sri Aurobindo wrote: "On this point I may add that in certain contexts 'barely' would be the right word; as for instance, 'There is barely enough food for two or three meals,' where 'hardly' would be adequate but much less forceful. It is the other way about in this line."

†Vol. 1, p. 3. ‡Ibid.

Something that wished but knew not how to be,
*Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance.**

But the teasing of the Inconscient remains and evidently you think that it is bad poetic taste to tease something so bodiless and unreal as the Inconscient. But here several fundamental issues arise. First of all, are words like Inconscient and Ignorance necessarily an abstract technical jargon? If so, do not words like "consciousness," "knowledge" etc. undergo the same ban? Is it meant that they are abstract philosophical terms and can have no real or concrete meaning, cannot represent things that one feels and senses or must often fight as one fights a visible foe? The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstractions and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. In fact, in writing this line I had no intention of teaching philosophy or forcing in an irrelevant metaphysical idea, although the idea may be there in implication. I was presenting a happening that was to me something sensible and, as one might say, psychologically and spiritually concrete. The Inconscient comes in persistently in the cantos of the First Book of *Savitri: e.g.*

Opponent of the glory of escape,
The black Inconscient swung its dragon tail
Lashing a slumberous Infinite by its force
Into the deep obscurities of form.†

There too a metaphysical idea might be read into or behind the thing seen. But does that make it technical jargon or the whole thing an illegitimate mixture? It is not so to my poetic sense. But you might say, "It is so to the non-mystical reader and it is that reader whom you have to satisfy, as it is for the general reader that you are writing and not for yourself alone." But if I had to write for the general reader I could not have written *Savitri* at all. It is in fact for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject-matter, images, technique of mystic poetry.

This is the real stumbling block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind. The mystic feels real and present, even ever present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as if in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. That was how a critic in a journal condemned such poems as *Nirvana* and *Transformation.* He said that they were mere intellectual conceptions and images and there was nothing of religious feeling or spiri-

* Vol. I, p. 4.
† Vol. I, p. 73.

tual experience. Yet *Nirvana** was as close a transcription of a major experience as could be given in language coined by the human mind of a realisation in which the mind was entirely silent and into which no intellectual conception could at all enter. One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. The critic's non-understanding was made worse by such a line as:

Only the illimitable Permanent
Is here.

Evidently he took this as technical jargon, abstract philosophy. There was no such thing; I felt with an overpowering vividness the illimitability or at least something which could not be described by any other term and no other description except the 'Permanent' could be made of That which alone existed. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. If I wrote, "His anger climbed against me in a stream", it would be to the general reader a mere image, not something that was felt by me in a sensible experience; yet I would only be describing in exact terms what actually happened once, a stream of anger, a sensible and violent current of it rising up from downstairs and rushing upon me as I sat in the veranda of the Guest-House, the truth of it being confirmed afterwards by the confession of the person who had the movement. This is only one instance, but all that is spiritual or psychological in *Savitri* is of that character. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

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* All is abolished but the mute Alone.
The mind from thought released, the heart from grief
Grow inexistent now beyond belief;
There is no I, no Nature, known-unknown.
The city, a shadow picture without tone,
Floats, quivers unreal; forms without relief
Flow, a cinema's vacant shapes; like a reef
Foundering in shoreless gulfs the world is done.

Only the illimitable Permanent
Is here. A Peace stupendous, featureless, still
Replaces all,—what once was I, in It
A silent unnamed emptiness content
Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita.* All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power.

The theory which discourages the poet from thinking or at least from thinking for the sake of the thought proceeds from an extreme romanticist temper, it reaches its acme on one side in the question of the surrealist, "Why do you want poetry to mean anything?" and on the other in Housman's exaltation of pure poetry which he describes paradoxically as a sort of sublime nonsense which does not appeal at all to the mental intelligence but knocks at the solar plexus and awakes a vital and physical rather than intellectual sensation and response. It is, of course, not that really but a vividness of imagination and feeling which disregards the mind's positive view of things and its logical sequences; the centre or centres it knocks at are not the brain-mind, not even the poetic intelligence but the subtle physical, the nervous, the vital or the psychic centre. The poem he quotes from Blake is certainly not nonsense, but it has no positive and exact meaning for the intellect or the surface mind; it expresses certain things that are true and real, not nonsense but a deeper sense which we feel powerfully with a great stirring of some inner emotion, but any attempt at exact intellectual statement of them sterilises their sense and spoils their appeal. This is not the method of *Savitri*. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience: it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

It may be noted that the greater romantic poets did not shun thought; they thought abundantly, almost endlessly. They have their characteristic view of life, something that one might call their philosophy, their world-view, and they express it. Keats was the most romantic of poets, but he

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* This dictum about the role of thought should not be taken as contradicting any implication of the sentence in an earlier letter: "Thinking is no longer in my line." What comes from "overhead" through the mystic's silent mind, as in Sri Aurobindo's later poetry, can very well assume a philosophical form. It is the presence of thought-form in poetry that is spoken of here, not the source from which it ultimately derives or the process by which it enters a poem.

could write, "To philosophise I dare not yet"; he did not write, "I am too much of a poet to philosophise." To philosophise he regarded evidently as mounting on the admiral's flag-ship and flying an almost royal banner. The philosophy of *Savitri* is different but it is persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple or admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a "poeticism" which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.

I have been insisting on these points in view of certain criticisms that have been made by reviewers and others, some of them very capable, suggesting or flatly stating that there was too much thought in my poems or that I am even in my poetry a philosopher rather than a poet. I am justifying a poet's right to think as well as to see and feel, his right to "dare to philosophise"; I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic: wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also he has weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve the dryness of much of his thought too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has perhaps restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style.

Now I come to the law prohibiting repetition. This rule aims at a certain kind of intellectual elegance which comes into poetry when the poetic intelligence and the call for a refined and classical taste begin to predominate. It regards poetry as a cultural entertainment and amusement of the highly civilised mind; it interests by a faultless art of words, a constant and ingenious invention, a sustained novelty of ideas, incidents, word

and phrase. An unfailing variety or the outward appearance of it is one of the elegances of this art. But all poetry is not of this kind; its rule does not apply to poets like Homer or Valmiki or other early writers. The Veda might almost be described as a mass of repetitions; so might the work of Vaishnava poets and the poetic literature of devotion generally in India. Arnold has noted this distinction when speaking of Homer; he mentioned especially that there is nothing objectionable in the close repetition of the same word in the Homeric way of writing. In many things Homer seems to make a point of repeating himself. He has stock descriptions, epithets always reiterated, lines even which are constantly repeated again and again when the same incident returns in his narrative: *e. g.* the line,

> *Doupēsen de pesōn arabēse de teuche' ep' auto—*
> *Down with a thud he fell and his armour clangoured upon him.*

He does not hesitate also to repeat the bulk of a line with a variation at the end, *e.g.*

> *Bē de kat' oulumpoio karēnōn chōōmenos kēr—*
> *Down from the peaks of Olympus he came, wrath vexing his heart-strings,*

and again,

> *Bē de kat' oulumpoio karēnōn āïxāsa—*
> *Down from the peaks of Olympus she came impetuously darting.*

He begins another line elsewhere with the same word and a similar action and with the same nature of a human movement physical and psychological in a scene of Nature, here a man's silent sorrow listening to the roar of the ocean:

> *Bē d' akeōn para thīna poluphlois boio thalassēs—*
> *Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean.*

In mystic poetry also repetition is not objectionable; it is resorted to by many poets, sometimes with insistence. I may cite as an example the constant repetition of the word *Ritam,* truth, sometimes eight or nine times in a short poem of nine or ten stanzas and often in the same line. This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. He uses *āvritti,* repetition, as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. This kind of repetition I have used largely in *Savitri.* Moreover, the object is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home

by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the *mot juste,* the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much. This is natural when the repetition is intended, serves a purpose; but it can hold even when the repetition is not deliberate but comes in naturally in the stream of the inspiration. I see, therefore, no objection to the recurrence of the same or similar image such as sea and ocean, sky and heaven in one long passage provided each is the right thing and rightly worded in its place. The same rule applies to words, epithets, ideas. It is only if the repetition is clumsy or awkward, too burdensomely insistent, at once unneeded and inexpressive or amounts to a disagreeable and meaningless echo that it must be rejected.

I think there is none of your objections that did not occur to me as possible from a certain kind of criticism when I wrote or I re-read what I had written, but I brushed them aside as invalid or as irrelevant to the kind of poem I was writing. So you must not be surprised at my disregard of them as too slight and unimperative. (1946)

* * *

What you have written as the general theory of the matter seems to be correct and it does not differ substantially from what I wrote. But your phrase about unpurposive repetition might carry a suggestion which I would not be able to accept; it might seem to indicate that the poet must have a "purpose" in whatever he writes and must be able to give a logical account of it to the critical intellect. That is surely not the way in which the poet or at least the mystic poet has to do his work. He does not himself deliberately choose or arrange word and rhythm but only sees it as it comes in the very act of inspiration. If there is any purpose of any kind, it also comes by and in the process of inspiration. He can criticise himself and the work; he can see whether it was a wrong or an inferior movement, he does not set about correcting it by any intellectual method but waits for the true thing to come in its place. He cannot always account to the logical intellect for what he has done: he feels or intuits, and the reader or critic has to do the same.

Thus I cannot tell you for what purpose I admitted the repetition of the word "great" in the line about the "great unsatisfied godhead",* I only felt that it was the one thing to write in that line as "her greatness" was the only right thing in a preceding line; I also felt that they did not and could not clash and that was enough for me. Again, it might be suggested that the "high" "warm" subtle ether of love was not only the right expression but that repetition of these epithets after they had been used in describing the atmosphere of Savitri's nature was justified and had a reason and purpose because it pointed and brought out the identity of the ether of love with

* Vol. 1, p. 16.

Savitri's atmosphere. But as a matter of fact I have no such reason or purpose. It was the identity which brought spontaneously and inevitably the use of the same epithets and not any conscious intention which deliberately used the repetition for a purpose.

Your contention that in the lines which I found to be inferior to their original form and altered back to that form, the inferiority was due to a repetition is not valid. In the line,

*And found in her a vastness like his own,**

the word "wideness" which had accidentally replaced "vastness" would have been inferior even if there had been no "wide" or "wideness" anywhere within a hundred miles and I would still have altered it back to the original word. So too with "sealed depths" and so many others. These alterations were due to inadvertence and not intentional; repetition or non-repetition had nothing to do with the matter. It was the same with "Wisdom nursing Chance":† if "nursing" had been the right word and not a slip replacing the original phrase I would have kept it in spite of the word "nurse" occurring immediately afterwards: only perhaps I would have taken care to so arrange that the repetition of the figure would simply have constituted a two-headed instead of a one-headed evil. Yes, I have changed in several places where you objected to repetitions but mostly for other reasons: I have kept many where there was a repetition and changed others where there was no repetition at all. I have indeed made modifications or changes where repetition came at a short distance at the end of a line; that was because the place made it too conspicuous. Of course where the repetition amounts to a mistake, I would have no hesitation in making a change; for a mistake must always be acknowledged and corrected. (1946)

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*Ibid.

† Vol. I, p. 39.

3

Obviously, the Overmind and aesthetics cannot be equated together. Aesthetics is concerned mainly with beauty, but more generally with *rasa*, the response of the mind, the vital feeling and the sense to a certain "taste" in things which often may be but is not necessarily a spiritual feeling. Aesthetics belongs to the mental range and all that depends upon it; it may degenerate into aestheticism or may exaggerate or narrow itself into some version of the theory of "Art for Art's sake". The Overmind is essentially a spiritual power. Mind in it surpasses its ordinary self and rises and takes its stand on a spiritual foundation. It embraces beauty and sublimates it; it has an essential aesthesis which is not limited by rules and canons; it sees a universal and an eternal beauty while it takes up and transforms all that is limited and particular. It is, besides, concerned with things other than beauty or aesthetics. It is concerned especially with truth and knowledge or rather with a wisdom that exceeds what we call knowledge; its truth goes beyond truth of fact and truth of thought, even the higher thought which is the first spiritual range of the thinker. It has the truth of spiritual thought, spiritual feeling, spiritual sense and at its highest the truth that comes by the most intimate spiritual touch or by identity. Ultimately, truth and beauty come together and coincide, but in between there is a difference. Overmind in all its dealings puts truth first; it brings out the essential truth (and truths) in things and also its infinite possibilities; it brings out even the truth that lies behind falsehood and error; it brings out the truth of the Inconscient and the truth of the Superconscient and all that lies in between. When it speaks through poetry, this remains its first essential quality; a limited aesthetical artistic aim is not its purpose. It can take up and uplift any or every style or at least put some stamp of itself upon it. More or less all that we have called Overhead poetry has something of this character whether it be from the Overmind or simply intuitive, illumined or strong with the strength of the higher revealing Thought; even when it is not intrinsically Overhead poetry, still some touch can come in. Even Overhead poetry itself does not always deal in what is new or striking or strange; it can take up the obvious, the common, the bare and even the bald, the old, even that which without it would seem stale and hackneyed and raise it to greatness. Take the lines:

I spoke as one who ne'er would speak again
And as a dying man to dying men.

The writer is not a poet, not even a conspicuously talented versifier. The statement of the thought is bare and direct and the rhetorical device used

is of the simplest, but the Overhead touch somehow got in through a passionate emotion and sincerity and is unmistakable. In all poetry a poetical aesthesis of some kind there must be in the writer and the recipient; but aesthetics is of many kinds and the ordinary kind is not sufficient for appreciating the Overhead element in poetry. A fundamental and universal aesthesis is needed, something also more intense that listens, sees and feels from deep within and answers to what is behind the surface. A greater, wider and deeper aesthesis then which can answer even to the transcendent and feel too whatever of the transcendent or spiritual enters into the things of life, mind and sense.

The business of the critical intellect is to appreciate and judge and here too it must judge; but it can judge and appreciate rightly here only if it first learns to see and sense inwardly and interpret. But it is dangerous for it to lay down its own laws or even laws and rules which it thinks it can deduce from some observed practice of the Overhead inspiration and use that to wall in the inspiration; for it runs the risk of seeing the Overhead inspiration step across its wall and pass on leaving it bewildered and at a loss. The mere critical intellect not touched by a rarer sight can do little here. We can take an extreme case, for in extreme cases certain incompatibilities come out more clearly. What might be called the Johnsonian critical method has obviously little or no place in this field,—the method which expects a precise logical order in thoughts and language and pecks at all that departs from a matter-of-fact or a strict and rational ideative coherence or a sober and restrained classical taste. Johnson himself is plainly out of his element when he deals crudely with one of Gray's delicate trifles and tramples and flounders about in the poet's basin of goldfish, breaking it with his heavy and vicious kicks. But also this method is useless in dealing with any kind of romantic poetry. What would the Johnsonian critic say to Shakespeare's famous lines,

Or take up arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them?

He would say, "What a mixture of metaphors and jumble of ideas! Only a lunatic could take up arms against a sea! A sea of troubles is too fanciful a metaphor and, in any case, one can't end the sea by opposing it, it is more likely to end you." Shakespeare knew very well what he was doing; he saw the mixture as well as any critic could and he accepted it because it brought home, with an inspired force which a neater language could not have had, the exact feeling and idea that he wanted to bring out. Still more scared would the Johnsonian critic be by any occult or mystic poetry. The Veda, for instance, uses with what seems like a deliberate recklessness the mixture, at least the association of disparate images, of things not associated together in the material world, which in Shakespeare is only an occasional departure. What would the Johnsonian make of this *Rik* in the Veda: "That splendour of thee, O Fire, which is in heaven and in the earth and in the plants and in the waters and by which thou hast spread out the wide

mid-air, is a vivid ocean of light which sees with a divine seeing"? He would say, "What is this nonsense? How can there be a splendour of light in plants and in water and how can an ocean of light see divinely or otherwise? Anyhow, what meaning can there be in all this, it is a senseless mystical jargon." But, apart from these extremes, the mere critical intellect is likely to feel a distaste or an incomprehension with regard to mystical poetry even if that poetry is quite coherent in its ideas and well-appointed in its language. It is bound to stumble over all sorts of things that are contrary to its reason and offensive to its taste: association of contraries, excess or abruptness or crowding of images, disregard of intellectual limitations in the thought, concretisation of abstractions, the treating of things and forces as if there were a consciousness and a personality in them and a hundred other aberrations from the straight intellectual line. It is not likely either to tolerate departures in technique which disregard the canons of an established order. Fortunately here the modernists with all their errors have broken old bounds and the mystic poet may be more free to invent his own technique.

Here is an instance in point. You refer to certain things I wrote and concessions I made when you were typing an earlier draft of the first books of *Savitri*. You instance my readiness to correct or do away with repetitions of words or clashes of sound such as "magnificent" in one line and "lucent" in the next. True, but I may observe that at that time I was passing through a transition from the habits of an old inspiration and technique to which I often deferred and the new inspiration that had begun to come.* I would still alter this clash because it was a clash, but I would not as in the old days make a fixed rule of this avoidance. If lines like the following were to come to me now—

His forehead was a dome magnificent,
And there gazed forth two orbs of lucent truth
That made the human air a world of light—

I would not reject them but accept "magnificent" and "lucent" as entirely in their place. But this would not be an undiscriminating acceptance; for if it had run—

His forehead was a wide magnificent dome
And there gazed forth two orbs of lucent truth—

I would not be so ready to accept it, for the repetition of sound here occurring in the same place in the line would lack the just rhythmical balance. I have accepted in the present version of *Savitri* several of the freedoms established by the modernists including internal rhyme, exact assonance of syllable, irregularities introduced into the iambic run of the metre and others which would have been equally painful to an earlier taste. But I have not taken this as a mechanical method or a mannerism, but only where I thought it rhythmically justified; for all freedom must have a truth in it and an order, either a rational or an instinctive and intuitive order. (1946)

* It is interesting to record that "at that time" Sri Aurobindo said he had originally written "luminous" instead of "lucent" but had cancelled it because it came in again "a little later" in a line which could not be touched—"a little later" meaning actually an interval of 25 lines!

4

Man alive, your proposed emendations* of

A slow miraculous gesture dimly came

to

Miraculous and dim
Miraculously dim
Dimly miraculous
Miraculous and slow
} a gesture came

are an admirable exposition of the art of bringing a line down the steps till my poor "slow miraculous' above-mind line meant to give or begin the concrete portrayal of an act of some hidden Godhead finally becomes a mere metaphor thrown out from its more facile mint by a brilliantly imaginative poetic intelligence. First of all, you shift my "dimly" out of the way and transfer it to something to which it does not inwardly belong, make it an epithet of the gesture or an adverb qualifying its epithet instead of something that qualifies the atmosphere in which the act of the Godhead takes place. That is a preliminary hovoc which destroys what is very important to the action, its atmosphere. I never intended the gesture to be dim, it is a luminous gesture, but forcing its way through the black quietude it comes dimly. Then again the bald phrase "a gesture came" without anything to psychicise it becomes simply something that "happened", "came" being a poetic equivalent for "happened", instead of the expression of the slow coming of the gesture. The words "slow" and "dimly" assure this sense of motion and this concreteness to the word's sense here. Remove one or both whether entirely or elsewhere and you ruin the vision and change altogether its character. That is at least what happens wholly in your penultimate version and as for the last its "came" gets another meaning and one feels that somebody very slowly decided to let out the gesture from himself and it was quite a miracle that it came out at all! "Dimly miraculous" means what precisely or what "miraculously dim"—it was miraculous that it managed to be so dim or there was something vaguely miraculous about it after all? No doubt they try to mean something else—but these interpretations come in their way and trip them over. The only thing that can

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* These emendations were not suggested as improvements in any way on the original line of Sri Aurobindo's which was splendid (though Sri Aurobindo himself subsequently altered it because of a new interrelation in the final expanded recast of his poem). They were only a hypothetical desperate resort in the interests of a point which is made clear in the footnote at the end of the present section. The object was to see if a certain change in the manner of adjective-use was possible so that a technical variety might be introduced in the passage of which the line in question was a part. The emendations unfortunately involved, among other things, the omission of one or another of the descriptive terms used by Sri Aurobindo. But variants not involving this were also offered for discussion, as the footnote already referred to will show.

stand is the first version which is fine poetry, but the trouble is that it does not give the effect I wanted to give, the effect which is necessary for the dawn's inner significance. Moreover, what becomes of the slow lingering rhythm of my line which is absolutely indispensable? (1936)

* * *

As to the double adjectives in the lines*—

Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,
The persistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along a fading moment's brink
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge—

if a slow wealth-burdened movement is the right thing, as it certainly is here in my judgment, the necessary means have to be used to bring it about —and the double adjectives are admirably suited for the purpose. Do not forget that *Savitri* is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure. Done on this rule, it is really a new attempt and cannot be hampered by old ideas of technique except when they are assimilable. Least of all by a standard proper to a mere intellectual and abstract poetry which makes "reason and taste" the supreme arbiters, aims at a harmonised poetic intellectual balanced expression of the sense, elegance in language, a sober and subtle use of imaginative decoration, a restrained emotive element. The attempt at mystic spiritual poetry of the kind I am at demands above all a spiritual objectivity, an intense psycho-physical concreteness. I do not know what you mean exactly here by "obvious" and "subtle". According to certain canons, epithets should be used sparingly, free use of them is rhetorical, an "obvious" device, a crowding of images is bad taste, there should be subtlety of art not displayed but severely concealed—*Summa ars est celare artem.* Very good for a certain standard of poetry, not so good or not good at all for others. Shakespeare kicks over these traces at every step. Aeschylus freely and frequently. Milton wherever he chooses. Such lines as

With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire

or

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* The first two lines here are different from those that in the present version precede the rest of the passage (Vol. I, p. 3). The version on which Sri Aurobindo commented is that of 1936. But the comment does not lose its essential force when the place in which the passage now stands demands that it should begin:

Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal.

Only one pair of adjectives out of four closely occurring "doubles" drops out.

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the shipboy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge

(note two double adjectives in three lines in the last)—are not subtle or restrained or careful to conceal their elements of powerful technique, they show rather a vivid richness or vehemence, forcing language to its utmost power of expression. That has to be done still more in this kind of mystic poetry. I cannot bring out the spiritual objectivity if I have to be miserly about epithets, images, or deny myself the use of all available resources of sound-significance. The double epithets are indispensable here and in the exact order in which they are arranged by me. You say the rich burdened movement can be secured by other means, but a rich burdened movement of any kind is not my primary object, it is desirable only because it is needed to express the spirit of the action here; and the double epithets are wanted because they are the best, not only one way of securing it. The "gesture" must be "slow miraculous"—if it is merely miraculous or merely slow, that does not create a picture of the thing as it is, but something quite abstract and ordinary or concrete and ordinary—it is the combination that renders the exact nature of the mystic movement, with the "dimly came" completing it, so that "gesture" is not here a metaphor but a thing actually done. Equally a "pale light" or an "enchanted light" may be very pretty, but it is only the combination that renders the luminosity which is that of a hand acting tentatively in the darkness. That darkness itself is described as a quietude which gives it a subjective spiritual character and brings out the thing symbolised, but the double epithet "inert black" gives it the needed concretness so that the quietude ceases to be something abstract and becomes something concrete, objective but still spiritually subjective. Every word must be the right word, with the right atmosphere, the right relation to all the other words, just as every sound in its place and the whole sound together must bring out the imponderable significance which is beyond verbal expression. One can't chop and change about on the principle that it is sufficient if the same mental sense or part of it is given with some poetical beauty or power. One can only change if the change brings out more perfectly the thing behind that is seeking for expression—brings out in full objectivity and also in the full mystic sense. If I can do that, well, other considerations have to take a backseat or seek their satisfaction elsewhere.* (1936)

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*The point discussed by Sri Aurobindo is a genuine and important one but it may be mentioned that the question which elicited the discussion gave rise to this precise point by some carelessness of phrasing. As Sri Aurobindo himself was informed later, the slight suspicion of "obviousness of method" referred not to the closely repeated use of the double adjectives but to the manner in which two epithets had been thus used—that is, without any separation of one from the other and immediately before a noun. An alernative—"A gesture slow, miraculous, dimly came" —was suggested, but admittedly the revelatory suspense in Sri Aurobindo's line was spoiled by the "gesture" being mentioned too soon. Also, "Miraculous, slow, a gesture dimly came" would blurt out things in its own way. "Yes, that is it," wrote Sri Aurobindo. And his general remark was: "The epithets are inseparable from the noun, they give a single impression which must not be broken up by giving a separate prominence to either noun or epithets."

About the image of the bird and the bosom * I understand what you mean,† but it rests upon the idea that the whole passage must be kept at the same transcendental level. It is true that all the rest gives the transcendental values in the composition of Savitri's being, while here there is a departure to show how this transcendental greatness contacts the psychic demand of human nature in its weakness and responds to it and acts upon it. That was the purpose of the new passage and it is difficult to accomplish it without bringing in a normal psychic instead of a transcendental tone. The image of the bird and the bosom is obviously not new and original, it images a common demand of the human heart and does it by employing a physical and emotional figure so as to give it a vivid directness in its own kind. This passage was introduced because it brought in something in Savitri's relation with the human world which seemed to me a necessary part of a complete psychological description of her. If it had to be altered, —which would be only if the descent to the psychic level really spoils the consistent integrality of the description and lowers the height of the poetry —I would have to find something equal and better, and just now I do not find any such satisfying alteration.

As for the line,

The strength, the silence of the gods were hers,‡

that has a similar motive of completeness. The line,

At once she was the stillness and the word,

gives us the transcendental element in Savitri, for the Divine Savitri is the word that rises from the transcendental stillness; the next two lines,

A continent of self-diffusing peace,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire,

render that element into the poise of the spiritual consciousness; this last line brings the same thing down to the outward character and temperament in life. A union of strength and silence is insisted upon in this poem as one

* In an additional passage in the description of Savitri (Book I, Canto 2):
As to a sheltering bosom a striken bird
Escapes with tired wings from a world of storms,
In a safe haven of splendid soft repose
One could restore life's wounded happiness,
Recover the lost habit of delight,
Feel like bright air her glorious ambiance
And preen joy in her warmth and colour's rule.

†"The simile of the 'sheltering bosom' and the 'stricken bird' makes an insufficiently intense and original impact on the reader. Doesn't it lower the high mystical level of image and symbol prevalent everywhere in the passage describing Savitri's being and nature?"

‡ Vol. I. p. 16. The remark upon it was: "This strikes me as a somewhat superfluous explanation, not remarkable in itself nor required poetically as a link."

of the most prominent characteristics of Savitri and I have dwelt on it elsewhere, but it had to be brought in here also if this description of her was to be complete. I do not find that this line lacks poetry or power; if I did, I would alter it. (1946)

* * *

I doubt whether I shall have the courage to throw out again the stricken and "too explicit" bird into the cold and storm outside; at most I might change that one line, the first, and make it stronger. I confess I fail to see what is so objectionable in its explicitness; usually, according to my idea, it is only things that are in themselves vague that have to be kept vague. There is plenty of room for the implicit and suggestive, but I do not see the necessity for that where one has to bring home a physical image.* (1946)

* * *

I have altered the "bird" passage and the repetition of "delight"† at the end of a line; the new version runs—

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness,
Feel her bright nature's glorious ambiance
And preen joy in her warmth and colour's rule. (1946)

* * *

The suggestion you make about the "soul" and the "bird"‡ may have a slight justification, but I do not think it is fatal to the passage. On the other hand there is a strong objection to the alteration you propose; it is that the image of the soul escaping from a world of storms would be impaired if it were only a physical bird that was escaping: a "world of storms"

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* In reply to this note it was explained: "Your view is unexceptionable. But it was not exactly the bird's explicitness that was objected to. The remark—'the image had better not be too explicit'—was made with an eye to the somewhat common character of the image. I may be right or wrong; but at last my meaning on this point of explicitness should be explicit enough now. I hope the changing and strengthening of the first line, which you speak of, will bring the alchemic touch."

† The twelfth line before the one ending with the word "delight" in the first version of the "bird" passage had been pointed out as ending with the same word—
Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight . . .

‡ The suggestion was: "Although your new version carries a subtle multiform image more in tune, in my opinion, with the general vision of the rest of the description of Savitri, 'one' who is himself a soul is compared to 'a soul' acting like a bird taking shelter, as if to say: 'A soul who is doing so-and-so is like a soul doing something similar'—a comparison which perhaps brings in some loss of surprise and revelation."

is too big an expression in relation to the smallness of the bird, it is only with the soul especially mentioned or else suggested and the "bird" subordinately there as a comparison that it fits perfectly well and gets its full value.

The word "one" which takes up the image of the "bird" has a more general application than the "soul" and is not quite identical with it; it means any one who has lost happiness and is in need of spiritual comfort and revival. It is as if one said: "as might a soul like a hunted bird take refuge from the world in the peace of the Infinite and feel that as its own remembered home, so could one take refuge in her as in a haven of safety and like the tired bird reconstitute one's strength so as to face the world once more." (1946)

* * *

My remarks about the "bird" passage are written from the point of view of the change made and the new character and atmosphere it gives. I think the old passage was right enough in its own atmosphere, but not so good as what has replaced it: the alteration you suggest may be as good as that, but the objections to it are valid from the new viewpoint. (1946)

* * *

As to the sixfold repetition of the indefinite article "a" in this passage, one should no doubt make it a general rule to avoid any such excessive repetition, but all rules have their exception and it might be phrased like this, "Except when some effect has to be produced which the repetition would serve or for which it is necessary". Here I feel that it does serve subtly such an effect; I have used the repetition of this "a" very frequently in the poem with a recurrence at the beginning of each successive line in order to produce an accumulative effect of multiple characteristics or a grouping of associated things or ideas or other similar massings. (1946)

6

I am afraid I shall not be able to satisfy your demand for rejection and alteration of the lines about the Inconscient and the cloak. I looked at your suggestion about adding a line or two in the first case, but could get nothing that would either improve the passage or set your objection at rest. I am quite unable to agree that there is anything jargonish about the line any more than there is in the lines of Keats,

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

That amounts to a generalised philosophical statement or enunciation and the word "beauty" and "truth" are abstract metaphysical terms to which we give a concrete and emotional value because they are connected in our associations with true and beautiful things of which our senses or our minds are vividly aware. Men have not learnt yet to recognise the Inconscient on which the whole material world they see is built, or the Ignorance of which their whole nature including their knowledge is built; they think that these words are only abstract metaphysical jargon flung about by the philosophers in their clouds or laboured out in long and wearisome books like *The Life Divine*. But it is not so with me and I take my stand on my own feeling and experience about them as Keats did about his own Truth and Beauty. My readers will have to do the same if they want to appreciate my poetry, which, of course, they are not bound to do.

Is it really a fact that even the ordinary reader would not be able to see any difference between the Inconscient and Ignorance unless the difference is expressly explained to him? This is not a matter of philosophical terminology but of common sense and the understood meaning of English words. One would say "even the inconscient stone" but one would not say, as one might, of a child, "the ignorant stone". One must first be conscious before one can be ignorant. What is true is that the ordinary reader might not be familiar with the philosophical content of the word Inconscient and might not be familiar with the Vedantic idea of the Ignorance as the power behind the manifested world. But I don't see how I can acquaint him with these things in a single line, even with the most illuminating image or symbol. He might wonder, if he were Johnsonianly minded, how an Inconscient could be teased or how it could wake Ignorance. I am afraid, in the absence of a miracle of inspired poetical exegesis flashing through my mind, he will have to be left wondering. I am not set against adding a line if the miracle comes or if some vivid symbol occurs to me, but as yet none such is making its appearance.*

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* What the commentator wished for was some symbolic suggestion as in other

In the other case also, about the cloak, I maintain my position. Here, however, while I was looking at the passage an additional line occurred to me and I may keep it:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.

But this additional line does not obviate your objection and it was not put in with that aim.† You have, by the way, made a curious misapplication of my image of the careful housewife; you attribute this line to her inspiration. A careful housewife is meticulously and methodically careful to arrange every thing in a perfect order, to put every object in its place and see that there is no disharmony anywhere; but according to you she has thrust a wrong object into a wrong place, something discordant with the surroundings and inferior in beauty to all that is near it; if so, she is not a careful housewife but a slattern. The Muse has a careful housewife,—there is Pope's, perfect in the classical or pseudo-classical style or Tennyson's, in the romantic or semi-romantic manner, while as a contrast there is Browning's with her energetic and rough-and-tumble dash and clatter.

You ask why in these and similar cases I could not convince you while I did in others. Well, there are several possible explanations. It may be that your first reaction to these lines was very vivid and left the mark of a *samskar* which could not be obliterated. Or perhaps I was right in the other matters while your criticism may have been right in these,—my partiality for these lines may be due to an unjustified personal attachment founded on the vision which they gave me when I wrote them. Again, there are always differences of poetical appreciation due either to preconceived notions or to different temperamental reactions. Finally, it may well be that my vision was true but for some reason you are not able to share it. For instance, you may have seen in the line about the cloak only the objective image in a detailed picture of the dawn where I felt a subjective suggestion in the failure of the darkness and the slipping of the cloak, not an image but an experience. It must be the same with the line,

The strength, the silence of the gods were hers.

You perhaps felt it to be an ordinary line with a superficial significance; perhaps it conveyed to you not much more than the stock phrase about the "strong silent man" admired by biographers, while to me it meant very much and expressed with a bare but sufficient power what I always regarded as a great reality and a great experience. (1946)

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phrases of Sri Aurobindo's that made the Inconscient a black dragon or a black rock. As an alternative he desired a further touch of vividness to drive home the distinction between the Inconscient and Ignorance, as in another line in 'Savitri': "And the blind Void struggles to live and see."

† It may be noted that the additional line was welcomed by the objector as making a subtle difference by bringing in just the suggestive touch which, though not introducing a direct affinity in the image to what goes before and comes after, provides it with the common mystical basis the various other images have, each in its own way.

7

You have asked me to comment on your friend's comments* on my poetry and especially on *Savitri.* But, first of all, it is not usual for a poet to criticise the criticisms of his critics though a few perhaps have done so; the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure. As for the contemporary world he might be said rather to throw his poem in its face and leave it to resent this treatment as an unpleasant slap, as a contemporary world treated the early poems of Wordsworth and Keats, or to accept it as an abrupt but gratifying attention, which was ordinarily the good fortune of the great poets in ancient Athens and Rome and of poets like Shakespeare and Tennyson in modern times. Posterity does not always confirm the contemporary verdict, very often it reverses it, forgets or depreciates the writer enthroned by contemporary fame, or raises up to a great height work little appreciated or quite ignored in its own time. The only safety for the poet is to go his own way careless of the blows and caresses of the critics; it is not his business to answer them. Then you ask me to right the wrong turn your friend's critical mind has taken; but how is it to be determined what is the right and what is the wrong turn, since a critical judgment depends usually on a personal reaction determined by the critic's temperament or the aesthetic trend in him or by values, rules or canons which are settled for his intellect and agree with the viewpoint from which his mind receives whatever comes to him for judgment; it is that which is right for him though it may seem wrong to a different temperament, aesthetic intellectuality or mental viewpoint. Your friend's judgments, according to his own account of them, seem to be determined by a sensitive temperament finely balanced in its own poise but limited in its appreciations, clear and open to some kinds of poetic creation, reserved towards others, against yet others closed and cold or excessively depreciative. This sufficiently explains his very different reactions to the two poems, *Descent* and *Flame-Wind,* which he unreservedly admires and to *Savitri.* However, since you have asked me, I will answer, as between ourselves, in some detail and put forward my own comments on his com-

*They were made apropos of the book, "The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo" by K. D. Sethna and they covered not only "Savitri" but also Sri Aurobindo's poetry in general. Sri Aurobindo's letter also covered the same field: the full text of it appeared in "Mother India", Special Number of August 15, 1951, and will be included in "Letters of Sri Aurobindo," the compilation containing the various letters on Yoga, life and literature published in "Mother India."

ments and my own judgments on his judgments. It may be rather long; for if such things are done, they may as well be clearly and thoroughly done. I may also have something to say about the nature and intention of my poem and the technique necessitated by the novelty of the intention and nature.

Let me deal first with some of the details he stresses so as to get them out of the way. His detailed intellectual reasons for his judgments seem to me to be often arbitrary and fastidious, sometimes based on a misunderstanding and therefore invalid or else valid perhaps in other fields but here inapplicable. Take, for instance, his attack upon my use of the prepositional phrase. Here, it seems to me, he has fallen victim to a grammatical obsession and lumped together under the head of the prepositional twist a number of different turns some of which do not belong to that category at all. In the line,*

Lone on my summits of calm I have brooded with voices around me,

there is no such twist; for I did not mean at all "on my calm summits", but intended straightforwardly to convey the natural, simple meaning of the word. If I write "the fields of beauty or "walking on the paths of truth" I do not expect to be supposed to mean "in beautiful fields" or "in truthful paths"; it is the same with "summits of calm", I mean "summits of calm" and nothing else; it is a phrase like "He rose to high peaks of vision" or "He took his station on the highest summits of knowledge". The calm is the calm of the highest spiritual consciousness to which the soul has ascended, making those summits its own and looking down from their highest heights on all below: in spiritual experience, in the occult vision or feeling that accompanies it, this calm is not felt as an abstract quality or a mental condition but as something concrete and massive, a self-existent reality to which one reaches, so that the soul standing on its peak is rather a tangible fact of experience than a poetical image. Then there is the phrase "A face of rapturous calm" in the lines,†

Infinity's centre, a face of rapturous calm
Parted the eternal lids that open heaven:

he seems to think it is a mere trick of language, a substitution of a prepositional phrase for an epithet, as if I had intended to say "a rapturously calm face" and I said instead "a face of rapturous calm" in order to get an illegitimate and meaningless rhetorical effect. I meant nothing of the kind, nothing so tame and poor and scanty in sense: I meant a face which was an expression or rather a living image of the rapturous calm of the supreme and infinite consciousness,—it is indeed so that it can well be "Infinity's centre". The face of the liberated Buddha as presented to us by Indian art is such an expression or image of the calm of Nirvana and could, I think, be quite legitimately described as a face of Nirvanic calm, and that

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* Not in "Savitri" but in "Trance of Waiting" ("Collected Poems and Plays," Vol. II, p. 363).

† "Savitri": Vol. I, p. 6.

would be an apt and live phrase and not an ugly artifice or twist of rhetoric. It should be remembered that the calm of Nirvana or the calm of the supreme Consciousness is to spiritual experience something self-existent, impersonal and eternal and not dependent on the person—or the face—which manifests it. In these two passages I take then the liberty to regard the criticism as erroneous at its base and therefore invalid and inadmissible.

Then there are the lines from the *Songs of the Sea:*

> *The rains of deluge flee, a storm-tossed shade,*
> *Over thy breast of gloom....*

"Thy breast of gloom" is not used here as a mere rhetorical and meaningless variation of "thy gloomy breast"; it might have been more easily taken as that if it had been a human breast, though even then, it could have been entirely defensible in a fitting context; but it is the breast of the sea, an image for a vast expanse supporting and reflecting or subject to the moods or movements of the air and the sky. It is intended, in describing the passage of the rains of deluge over the breast of the sea, to present a picture of a storm-tossed shade crossing a vast gloom: it is the gloom that has to be stressed and made the predominant idea and the breast or expanse is only its support and not the main thing: this could not have been suggested by merely writing "thy gloomy breast". A prepositional phrase need not be merely an artificial twist replacing an adjective; for instance, "a world of gloom and terror" means something more than "a gloomy and terrible world", it brings forward the gloom and terror as the very nature and constitution, the whole content of the world and not merely an attribute. So also if one wrote "Him too wilt thou throw to thy sword of sharpness" or "cast into thy pits of horror", would it merely mean "thy sharp sword" and "thy horrible pits" and would not the sharpness and the horror rather indicate or represent formidable powers of which the sword is the instrument and the pits the habitation or lair? That would be rhetoric but it would be a rhetoric not meaningless but having in it meaning and power. Rhetoric is a word with which we can batter something we do not like; but rhetoric of one kind or another has been always a great part of the world's best literature; Demosthenes, Cicero, Bossuet and Burke are rhetoricians, but their work ranks with the greatest prose styles that have been left to us. In poetry the accusation of rhetoric might be brought against such lines as Keats'

> *Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!*
> *No hungry generations tread thee down . . .*

To conclude, there is "the swords of sheen" in the translation of *Vande Mataram.* That might be more open to the critic's stricture, for the expression can be used and perhaps has been used in verse as merely equivalent to "shining swords"; but for any one with an alert imagination it can mean in certain contexts something more than that, swords that emit brilliance and seem to be made of light. Your friend says that to use this turn in any

other than an adjectival sense is unidiomatic, but he admits that there need be no objection provided that it creates a sense of beauty, but he finds no beauty in any of these passages. But the beauty can be perceived only if the other sense is seen, and even then we come back to the question of personal reaction; you and other readers may feel beauty where he finds none. I do not myself share his sensitive abhorrence of this prepositional phrase; it may be of course because there are coarser rhetorical threads in my literary taste. I would not, for instance, shrink from a sentence like this in a sort of free verse, "Where is thy wall of safety? Where is thy arm of strength? Whither has fled thy-vanished face of glory?" Rhetoric of course, but it has in it an element which can be attractive, and it seems to me to bring in a more vivid note and mean more than "thy strong arm" or "thy glorious face" or than "the strength of thy arm" and "the glory of thy face".

I come next to the critic's trenchant attack on that passage in my symbolic vision of Night and Dawn in *Savitri,* in which there is recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light. Trenchant, but with what seems to me a false edge; or else if it is a sword of Damascus that would cleave the strongest material mass of iron he is using it to cut through subtle air, the air closes behind his passage and remains unsevered. He finds here only poor and false poetry, unoriginal in imagery and void of true wording and true vision, but that is again a matter of personal reaction and everyone has a right to his own, you to yours as he to his. I was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and that may be because I could not express myself with any power; but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel and see what I felt and saw. I can only answer to the intellectual reasonings and judgments which turned up in him when he tried to find the causes of his reaction. These seem to me to be either fastidious and unsound or founded on a mistake of comprehension and therefore invalid or else inapplicable to this kind of poetry. His main charge is that there is a violent and altogether illegitimate transference of epithet in the expression "the wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind". A transference of epithet is not necessarily illegitimate, especially if it expresses something that is true or necessary to convey a sound feeling and vision of things: for instance, if one writes in an Ovidian account of the *dénouement* of a lover's quarrel,

In spite of a reluctant sullen heart
My willing feet were driven to thy door,

it might be said that it was something in the mind that was willing and the ascription of an emotion or state of mind to the feet is an illegitimate transfer of epithet; but the lines express a conflict of the members, the mind reluctant, the body obeying the force of the desire that moves it and the use of the epithet is therefore perfectly true and legitimate. But here no such defence is necessary becaue there is no transfer of epithets. The critic thinks that I imagined the wind as having a winged body and then took

away the wings from its shoulders and clapped them on to its voice or hymn which could have no body. But I did nothing of the kind; I am not bound to give wings to the wind. In an occult vision the breath, sound, movement by which we physically know of a wind is not its real being but only the physical manifestation of the wind-god or the spirit of the air, as in the Veda the sacrificial fire is only a physical birth, temporary body or manifestation of the god of Fire, Agni. The gods of the Air and other godheads in the Indian tradition have no wings, the Maruts or storm-gods ride through the skies in their galloping chariots with their flashing golden lances, the beings of the middle world in the Ajanta frescoes are seen moving through the air not with wings but with a gliding natural motion proper to ethereal bodies. The epithet "wide-winged" then does not belong to the wind and is not transferred from it, but is proper to the voice of the wind which takes the form of a conscious hymn of aspiration and rises ascending from the bosom of the great priest, as might a great-winged bird released into the sky, and sinks and rises again, aspires and fails and aspires again on the "altar hills". One can surely speak of a voice or a chant of aspiration rising on wide wings and I do not see how this can be taxed as a false or unpoetic image. Then the critic objects to the expression "altar hills" on the ground that this is superfluous as the imagination of the reader can very well supply this detail for itself from what has already been said: I do not think this is correct, a very alert reader might do so but most would not even think of it, and yet the detail is an essential and central feature of the thing seen and to omit it would be to leave a gap in the middle of the picture by dropping out something which is indispensable to its totality. Finally he finds that the line about the high boughs praying in the revealing sky does not help but attenuates, instead of more strongly etching the picture. I do not know why, unless he has failed to feel and to see. The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees. The wind is the great priest of this sacrifice of worship, his voice rises in a conscious hymn of aspiration, the hills offer themselves with the feeling of being an altar of the worship, the trees lift their high boughs towards heaven as the worshippers, silent figures of prayer, and the light of the sky into which their boughs rise reveals the Beyond towards which all aspires. At any rate this "picture" or rather this part of the vision is a complete rendering of what I saw in the light of the inspiration and the experience that came to me. I might indeed have elaborated more details, etched out at more length but that would have been superfluous and unnecessary; or I might have indulged in an ampler description but this would have been appropriate only if this part of the vision had been the whole. This last line—"The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky"—is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the ex-

perience or in the words that express it. If the critic or any reader does not feel or see what I so often felt and saw, that may be my fault, but that is not sure, for you and others have felt very differently about it; it may be a mental or a temperamental failure on their part and it will be then my or perhaps even the critic's or reader's misfortune.

I may refer here to your friend's disparaging characterisation of my epithets. He finds that their only merit is that they are good prose epithets, not otiose but right words in their right place and exactly descriptive but only descriptive without any suggestion of any poetic beauty or any kind of magic. Are there then prose epithets and poetic epithets and is the poet debarred from exact description using always the right word in the right place, the *mot juste?* I am under the impression that all poets, even the greatest, use as the bulk of their adjectives words that have that merit, and the difference from prose is that a certain turn in the use of them accompanied by the power of the rhythm in which they are carried lifts all to the poetic level. Take one of the passages from Milton:

On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues....
Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

Here the epithets are the same that would be used in prose, the right word in the right place, exact in statement, but all lies in the turn which makes them convey a powerful and moving emotion and the rhythm which gives them an uplifting passion and penetrating insistence. In more ordinary passages such as the beginning of *Paradise Lost* the epithets "forbidden tree" and "mortal taste" are of the same kind, but can we say that they are merely prose epithets, good descriptive adjectives and have no other merit? If you take the lines about Nature's worship in *Savitri,* I do not see how they can be described as prose epithets; at any rate I would never have dreamt of using in prose unless I wanted to write poetic prose such expressions as "wide-winged hymn" or "a great priestly wind" or "altar hills" or "revealing sky"; these epithets belong in their very nature to poetry alone whatever may be their other value or want of value. He says they are obvious and could have been supplied by any imaginative reader; well, so are Milton's in the passages quoted and perhaps there too the very remarkable imaginative reader whom your friend repeatedly brings in might have supplied them by his own unfailing poetic verve. Whether they or any of them prick a hidden beauty out of the picture is for each reader to feel or judge for himself; but perhaps he is thinking of such things as Keats' "magic casements" and "foam of perilous seas" and "fairy lands forlorn", but I do not think even in Keats the bulk of the epithets are of that unusual character.

I have said that his objections are sometimes inapplicable. I mean by this that they might have some force with regard to another kind of poetry but not to a poem like *Savitri.* He says, to start with, that if I had had a

stronger imagination, I would have written a very different poem and a much shorter one. Obviously, and to say it is a truism; if I had had a different kind of imagination, whether stronger or weaker, I would have written a different poem and perhaps one more to his taste; but it would not have been *Savitri*. It would not have fulfilled the intention or had anything of the character, meaning, world-vision, description and expression of spiritual experience which was my object in writing this poem. Its length is an indispensable condition for carrying out its purpose and everywhere there is this length, critics may say an "unconscionable length"—I am quoting the description of the *Times' Litarary Supplement's* reviewer in his otherwise eulogistic criticism of *The Life Divine*—in every part, in every passage, in almost every canto or section of a canto. It has been planned not on the scale of *Lycidas* or *Comus* or some brief narrative poem, but of the longer epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor *Ramayana;* it aims not at a minimum but at an exhaustive exposition of its world-vision or world-interpretation. One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness: that is the method I have chosen in *Savitri*. But your friend has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is criticising, least of all, their inner sense—that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it: inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney.* His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the "day" of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a

* The Critic's Note: "Could I have anticipated that my letter would meet his eyes, had I even intended the criticism for print, I would have written in the more becoming spirit of a student, in a strain free from the suspicion of levity, and I would have abstained from words like...... (well, I shrink from writing them now), using others untinged with offence, and perhaps more nearly expressive of my feeling."

legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates "sombre vast", "unsounded void," "opaque Inane," "vacant vasts"* and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass. What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader, not imaginative but attentive to seize the whole truth of the vision in its totality, the ever-present sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the "lonely splendour" into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the "opaque Inane" of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the "tread" of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it. The same reasoning applies to the other passages. As for the occurrence of the phrases in the same place each in its line, that is a rhythmic turn helpful, one might say necessary to bring out the intended effect, to emphasise this reiteration and make it not only understood but felt. It is not the result of negligence or an awkward and inartistic clumsiness, it is intentional and part of the technique. The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambment or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; there must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere,—there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what

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* Vol. I. pp. 4, 6.

comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence—whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. It is this use that is served here by the reiteration at the end of the line.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu pres* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself, whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding. *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable; evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

Your friend may say as he has said in another connection that all this is only special pleading or an apology rather than an apologia. But in that other connection he was mistaken and would be so here too, for in neither case have I the feeling that I had been guilty of some offence or

some shortcoming and therefore there could be no place for an apology or special pleading such as is used to defend or cover up what one knows to be a false case. I have enough respect for truth not to try to cover up an imperfection; my endeavour would be rather to cure the recognised imperfection; if I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking: that I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on *Savitri*. Or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right. The critic was evidently under a misconception with regard to my defence of the wealth-burdened line; he says that the principle enounced by me was sound but what mattered was my application of the principle, and he seems to think that I was trying to justify my application although I knew it to be bad and false by citing passages from Milton and Shakespeare as if my use of the wealth-burdened style were as good as theirs. But I was not defending the excellence of my practice, for the poetical value of my lines was not then in question; the question was whether it did not violate a valid law of a certain chaste economy by the use of too many epithets massed together: against this I was asserting the legitimacy of a massed richness, I was defending only its principle, not my use of the principle. Even a very small poet can cite in aid of his practice examples from greater poets without implying that his poetry is on a par with theirs. But he further asserts that I showed small judgment in choosing my citations, because Milton's passage,

With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,

is not at all an illustration of the principle and Shakespeare's

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the shipboy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge?

is inferior in poetic value, lax and rhetorical in its richness and belongs to an inferior Shakespearean style. He says that Milton's astounding effect is due only to the sound and not to the words. That does not seem to me quite true: the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour and clangour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the "hideous" and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear. Your friend's disparagement of the Shakespearean passage on "sleep" and the line on the sea considered by

the greatest critics and not by myself only as ranking amongst the most admired and admirable things in Shakespeare is surprising and it seems to me to illustrate a serious limitation in his poetic perception and temperamental sympathies. Shakespeare's later terse and packed style with its more powerful dramatic effects can surely be admired without disparaging the beauty and opulence of his earlier style; if he had never written in that style, it would have been an unspeakable loss to the sum of the world's aesthetic possessions. The lines I have quoted are neither lax nor merely rhetorical, they have a terseness or at least a compactness of their own, different in character from the lines, let us say, in the scene of Antony's death or other memorable passages written in his great tragic style but none the less at every step packed with pregnant meanings and powerful significances which would not be possible if it were merely a loose rhetoric. Anyone writing such lines would deserve to rank by them alone among the great and even the greatest poets....

As regards your friend's appraisal of the mystical poems, I need say little. I accept his reservation that there is much inequality as between the different poems: they were produced very rapidly—in the course of a week, I think—and they were not given the long reconsideration that I have usually given to my poetic work before publication; he has chosen the best, though there are others also that are good, though not so good; in others, the metre attempted and the idea and language have not been lifted to their highest possible value. I would like to say a word about his hesitation over some lines in *Thought the Paraclete* which describe the spiritual planes. I can understand this hesitation; for these lines have not the vivid and forceful precision of the opening and the close and are less pressed home, they are general in description and therefore to one who has not the mystic experience may seem too large and vague. But they are not padding; a precise and exact description of these planes of experience would have made the poem too long, so only some large lines are given, but the description is true, the epithets hit the reality and even the colours mentioned in the poem, "gold-red feet" and "crimson-white mooned oceans" are faithful to experience. Significant colour, supposed by intellectual criticism to be symbolic but there is more than that, is a frequent element in mystic vision; I may mention the powerful and vivid vision in which Ramakrishna went up into the higher planes and saw the mystic truth behind the birth of Vivekananda. At least, the fact that these poems have appealed so strongly to your friend's mind may perhaps be taken by me as a sufficient proof that in this field my effort at interpretation of spiritual things has not been altogether a failure.

But how then are we to account for the same critic's condemnation or small appreciation of *Savitri* which is also a mystic and symbolic poem although cast into a different form and raised to a different pitch, and what value am I to attach to his criticism? Partly, perhaps, it is this very difference of form and pitch which accounts for his attitude and, having regard

to his aesthetic temperament and its limitations, it was inevitable. He himself seems to suggest this reason when he compares this difference to the difference of his approach as between *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*. His temperamental turn is shown by his special appreciation of Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore and his response to *Descent* and *Flame-Wind* and the fineness of his judgment when speaking of the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God,* its limitation by his approach towards *Paradise Lost*. I think he would be naturally inclined to regard any very high-pitched poetry as rhetorical and unsound and declamatory, wherever he did not see in it something finely and subtly true coexisting with the high-pitched expression,—the combination we find in Thompson's later poem and it is this he seems to have missed in *Savitri*. For *Savitri* does contain or at least I intended it to contain what you and others have felt in it but he has not been able to feel because it is something which is outside his own experience and to which he has no access. One who has had the kind of experience which *Savitri* sets out to express or who, not having it, is prepared by his temperament, his mental turn, his previous intellectual knowledge or psychic training, to have some kind of access to it, the feeling of it if not the full understanding, can enter into the spirit and sense of the poem and respond to its poetic appeal; but without that it is difficult for an unprepared reader to respond,—all the more if this is, as you contend, a new poetry with a new law of expression and technique.

Lycidas is one of the finest poems in any literature, one of the most consistently perfect among works of an equal length and one can apply to it the epithet "exquisite" and it is to the exquisite that your friend's aesthetic temperament seems specially to respond. It would be possible to a reader with a depreciatory turn to find flaws in it, such as the pseudo-pastoral setting, the too powerful intrusion of St. Peter and puritan theological controversy into that incongruous setting and the image of the hungry sheep which someone not in sympathy with Christian feeling and traditional imagery might find even ludicrous or at least odd in its identification of pseudo-pastoral sheep and theological human sheep: but these would be hypercritical objections and are flooded out by the magnificence of the poetry. I am prepared to admit the very patent defects of *Paradise Lost:* Milton's heaven is indeed unconvincing and can be described as grotesque and so too is his gunpowder battle up there, and his God and angels are weak and unconvincing figures, even Adam and Eve, our first parents, do not effectively fill their part except in his outward description of them; and the later narrative falls far below the grandeur of the first four Books but those four Books stand for ever among the greatest things in the world's poetic literature. If *Lycidas* with its beauty and perfection had been the supreme thing done by Milton even with all the lyrical poetry and the sonnets added to it, Milton would still have been a great poet but he would not have ranked among the dozen greatest; it is *Paradise Lost* that gives him that place. There are deficiencies if not failures in almost all

the great epics, the *Odyssey* and perhaps the *Divina Commedia* being the only exceptions, but still they are throughout in spite of them great epics. So too is *Paradise Lost*. The grandeur of his verse and language is constant and unsinking to the end and makes the presentation always sublime. We have to accept for the moment Milton's dry Puritan theology and his all too human picture of the celestial world and its denizens and then we can feel the full greatness of the epic. But the point is that this greatness in itself seems to have less appeal to your friend's aesthetic temperament; it is as if he felt less at home in its atmosphere, in an atmosphere of grandeur and sublimity than in the air of a less sublime but a fine and always perfect beauty. It is the difference between a magic hill-side woodland of wonder and a great soaring mountain climbing into a vast purple sky: to accept fully the greatness he needs to find in it a finer and sublimer strain as in Thompson's *Kingdom of God*. On a lower scale this, his sentence about it seems to suggest, is the one fundamental reason for his complete pleasure in the mystical poems and his very different approach to *Savitri*. The pitch aimed at by *Savitri*, the greatness you attribute to it, would of itself have discouraged in him any abandonment to admiration and compel from the beginning a cautious and dubious approach; that soon turned to lack of appreciation or a lowered appreciation even of the best that may be there and to depreciation and censure of the rest.*

But there is the other reason which is more effective. He sees and feels nothing of the spiritual meaning and the spiritual appeal which you find in *Savitri*; it is for him empty of anything but an outward significance and that seems to him poor, as is natural since the outward meaning is only a part and a surface and the rest is to his eyes invisible. If there had been what he hoped or might have hoped to find in my poetry, a spiritual vision such as that of the Vedantin, arriving beyond the world towards the Ineffable, then he might have felt at home as he does with Thompson's poetry or might at least have found it sufficiently accessible. But this is not what *Savitri* has to say or rather it is only a small part of it and, even so, bound up with a cosmic vision and an acceptance of the world which in its kind is

* The Critic's Note: "To illustrate my discomfiture at the slightness of the appeal of Sri Aurobindo's epic in comparison with that of his mystical lyrics, I put myself in the place, the suppositious place, of a reader who discovers a similar gulf between the effect made upon himself by a smaller and comparatively slighter poem like 'Lycidas' and by 'Paradise Lost'. This sentence Sri Aurobindo, in his haste or owing to my own faulty expression, seems to have misconstrued; and perhaps taking it in conjunction with the impression made by other remarks in my letter, he has concluded that I am naturally more receptive of the 'exquisite' in poetry than of the 'high-pitched' and 'sublime' generally."

Editor's Note on the above: The critic's sentence ran: "I feel rather like one who, having read 'Lycidas' with extreme delight, finds to his dismay that he must greet 'Paradise Lost' with strictly modified rapture." Whatever the exact shade of meaning intended in these rather ambiguous words, I think it can be affirmed from personal knowledge of the critic's sensibiliti s that as a rule his response to the 'exquisite' comes at least more easily, more quickly. Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the sentence was necessarily part of his general intuitive as well as intellectual impression of the critic's mind and aesthetic tendencies from the whole letter.

unfamiliar to his mind and psychic sense and foreign to his experience. The two passages with which he deals do not and cannot give any full presentation of this way of seeing things since one is an unfamiliar symbol and the other an incidental and, taken by itself apart from its context, an isolated circumstance. But even if he had had other more explicit and clearly revealing passages at his disposal, I do not think he would have been satisfied or much illuminated; his eyes would still have been fixed on the surface and caught only some intellectual meaning or outer sense. That at least is what we may suppose to have been the cause of his failure, if we maintain that there is anything at all in the poem;* or else we must fall back on the explanation of a fundamental personal incompatibility and the rule *de gustibus non est disputandum,* or to put it in the Sanskrit form *nana ruchirhi lokah.* If you are right in maintaining that *Savitri* stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience.

At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation, to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to one and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum;* but the world's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and élite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *Viswa Manava* or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic self in the race that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in li-

* The Critic's Note: "It is not unlikely that there is a strangeness in the passages—their mere novelty, which inhibits a full giving of myself to them: this strangeness will pass when the poet has come to an end of his long labour, unhasting, unresting, and I have 'Savitri' in full to read, re-read, and return to... It is possible that, while the sublime and high-pitched is not wholly sealed up from my apprehension, that of the Dawn-prelude (like that of the other passages) is fused with certain other qualities, spiritual and intellectual, of a kind that renders the verse imperfectly conductive of its force to myself. Some instinct of the mystical I needs must have, if for none other reason, at least for that I am an Indian. But my knowledge of the sacred lore is neither extensive nor peculiar, and 'psychic training' or 'equipment' I have none... And this quite apart from the extra-ordinary character of the spirituality, the cosmicity, that informs the epic..."

terature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute,—so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance. It is no use for some to contend that Virgil is a tame and elegant writer of a wearisome work in verse on agriculture and a tedious pseudo-epic written to imperial order and Lucretius the only really great poet in Latin literature or to depreciate Milton for his Latin English and inflated style and the largely uninteresting character of his two epics; the world either refuses to listen or there is a temporary effect, a brief fashion in literary criticism, but finally the world returns to its established verdict. Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake's or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne's is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised; or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its place. What was held as sovereign in its own time is rudely dethroned but afterwards recovers not its sovereign throne but its due position in the world's esteem; Pope is an example and Byron who at once burst into a supreme glory and was the one English poet, after Shakespeare, admired all over Europe but is now depreciated, may also recover his proper place. Encouraged by such examples, let us hope that these violently adverse judgments may not be final and absolute and decide that the waste paper basket is not the proper place for *Savitri*. There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world's being, not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite, as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire.

I had intended as the main subject of this letter to say something about technique and the inner working of the intuitive method by which *Savitri* was and is being created and of the intention and plan of the poem. Your friend's idea of its way of creation, an intellectual construction by a deliberate choice of words and imagery, badly chosen at that, is the very opposite of the real way in which it was done. That was to be the body of the letter and the rest only a preface. But the preface has become so long that it has crowded out the body. I shall have to postpone it to a later occasion when I have more time. (4-5-1947)

8

As to the title of the three cantos about the Yoga of the King,* I intended the repetition of the word "Yoga" to bring out and emphasise the fact that this part of Aswapathy's spiritual development consisted of two Yogic movements, one a psycho-spiritual transformation and the other a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power. The omission which you suggest would destroy this significance and leave only something more abstract. In the second of these three cantos there is a pause between the two movements and a description of the secret knowledge to which the Yoga is led and of which the results are described in the last canto, but there is no description of the Yoga itself or of the steps by which this knowledge came. That is only indicated, not narrated; so, to bring in "The Yoga of the King" as the title of this canto would not be very apposite. Aswapathy's Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as the individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the Second Book: but this too is yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother. (1946)

* * *

Yes,—"an accumulating grandiose effect is intended by the repetition of adjective-and-noun in four consecutive line-endings" in:

Almost they saw who lived within her light
Her playmate in the sempiternal spheres
Descended from its unattainable realms
In her attractive advent's luminous wake,
The white-fire dragon bird of endless bliss
Drifting with burning wings above her days.†

The purpose is to create a large luminous trailing repetitive movement like the flight of the bird with its dragon tail of white fire. (1936)

* * *

All birds of that region are relatives.‡ But this is the bird of eternal

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* Book I. Canto 3: The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Soul's Release.
Canto 4: The Secret Knowledge.
Canto 5: The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Spirit's Freedom and Greatness.

† Vol. I. p. 17.

‡ The question was: "In the mystical region, is the dragon bird any relation of your Bird of Fire with 'gold-white wings' or your Hippogriff with "face lustred. pale-blue-lined?"

Ananda while the Hippogriff is the divinised Thought and the Bird of Fire is the Agni-bird, psychic and *tapas*. All that, however, is to mentalise too much and mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things. That is why I say, the dragon bird can be seen but nothing said about it.

(1936)

* * *

One dealt with her who meets the burdened great—*

it is not Love who meets the burdened great and governs the fates of man. Nor is it Pain. Time also does not do these things—it only provides the field and the movement of events. If I had wanted to give a name, I would have done it, but he was purposely to be left nameless because he is indefinable. He may use Love or Pain or Time or any of these powers but is not any of them. You can call him the Master of the Evolution, if you like. (1936)

* * *

As to the plane spoken of by Virgil—

Largior hic campos aether et lumine vestit
Purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera noruntt†—

I don't know, but purple is a light of the Vital. It may have been one of the vital heavens he was thinking of. The ancients saw the vital heavens as the highest and most of the religions also have done the same. I have used the suggestion of Virgil to insert a needed line:

In griefless countries under purple suns‡ (1936)

* * *

Often a familiar visage studying...
His vision warned by the spirit's inward eye
Discovered suddenly Hell's trademark there§—

it is a reference to the beings met in the vital world, that seem like human beings but, if one looks closely, they are seen to be Hostiles; often assuming the appearance of a familiar face they try to tempt or attack by surprise, and betray the stamp of their origin—there is also a hint that on earth too they take up human bodies or possess them for their own purpose.

(1936)

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* The context of the line (Vol. I. p. 17) is:

One dealt with her who meets the burdened great.
Assigner of the ordeal and the path
Who chooses in this holocaust of the soul
Death, fall and sorrow as the spirit's goads,
The dubious godhead with his torch of pain
Lit up the chasm of the unfinished world
And called her to fill with her vast self the abyss...

The question was: "Who is 'One' here? Is it Love, the godhead mentioned before? If not, does this 'dubious godhead with his torch of pain' correspond to 'the image white and high of godlike Pain' spoken of a little earlier? Or is it Time whose 'snare' occurs in the last line of the preceding passage?"

† "Here an ampler ether spreads over the plains and clothes them in purple light, and they have a sun of their own and their own stars."

‡ Vol. I. p. 110. § Vol. I. p. 196.

The lines—

Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible,
Coiled back to itself and God's eternal joy
Through a false poignant figure of grief and pain
Still dolorously nailed upon a cross
Fixed in the soil of a dumb insentient world
Where birth was a pang and death an agony,
*Lest all too soon should change again to bliss**—*

have nothing to do with Christianity or Christ but only with the symbol of the cross used here to represent a seemingly eternal world-pain which appears falsely to replace the eternal bliss. It is not Christ but the world-soul which hangs here.

* * *

The Mask is mentioned not twice but four times in this opening passage† and it is purposely done to keep up the central connection of the idea running through the whole. The ambassadors wear this grey Mask, so your criticism cannot stand since there is no separate mask coming as part of a new idea but a very pointed return to the principal note indicating the identity of the influence throughout. It is not a random recurrence but a purposeful touch carrying a psychological meaning. (1948)

* * *

The two trios in

And overcast with error, grief and pain
The soul's native will for truth and joy and light‡

are not intended to be exactly correspondent; "joy" answers to both "grief" and "pain" while "light" is an addition in the second trio indicating the conditions for "truth" and "joy". (1948)

* * *

Your objection to the "finger" and the "clutch" in the lines—

As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
Reminding of the endless need in things
The heedless Mother of the universe,
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast§—

moves me only to change "reminding" to "reminded" in the second line. It is not intended that the two images "finger laid" and "clutch" should correspond exactly to each other; for the "void" and the "Mother of the universe" are not the same thing. The "void" is only a mask covering the Mother's cheek or face. What the "void" feels as a clutch is felt by the Mother only as a reminding finger laid on her cheek. It is one advantage of the expression "as if" that it leaves the field open for such variation. It is intended to suggest without saying it that behind the sombre void is the face of a mother. The two other "as if" 's—

* Vol. I. p. 201. † Vol. I. pp. 184, 185. ‡ Vol. I. p. 185.
§ Vol. I. p. 4.

As if a soul long dead were moved to live

and

As if solicited in an alien world—

have the same motive and I do not find them jarring upon me. The second is at a sufficient distance from the first and it is not obtrusive enough to prejudice the third which more nearly follows. Your suggestion "as though" for the third does not appeal to me: it almost makes a suggestion of falsity and in any case it makes no real difference as the two expressions are too much kin to each other to repel the charge of reiteration. (1946)

* * *

Owing to a mistake in the punctuation which is now corrected, you have made what seems to me a strange confusion as regards the passage—

As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home,
An errant marvel with no place to live,
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
*A slow miraculous gesture's dim appeal.**

You took the word "solicited" as a past participle passive and this error seems to have remained fixed in your mind so as to distort the whole building and sense of the passage. The word "solicited" is the past tense and the subject of this verb is "an errant marvel" delayed to the fourth line by the parenthesis "Orphaned . . . ." This kind of inversion, though longer than usual, is common enough in poetical style and the object is to throw a strong emphasis and prominence upon the line, "An errant marvel with no place to live." That being explained, the rest about the gesture should be clear enough.

I see no sufficient reason to alter the passage; certainly, I could not alter the line beginning "Orphaned..."; it is indispensable to the total idea and its omission would leave an unfilled gap. If I may not expect a complete alertness from the reader,—but how without it can he grasp the subtleties of a mystical and symbolic poem?—he surely ought to be alert enough when he reads the second line to see that it is somebody who is soliciting with a timid grace and it can't be somebody who is being gracefully solicited; also the line "Orphaned..." ought to suggest to him at once that it is some orphan who is soliciting and not the other way round: the delusion of the past participle passive ought to be dissipated long before he reaches the subject of the verb in the fourth line. The obscurity throughout, if there is any, is in the mind of the hasty reader and not in the grammatical construction of the passage. (1946)

* * *

* Vol. I. p. 5.

"Depths" will not do,* since the meaning is not that it took no part in what came from the depths but did take part in what came from the shallows; the word would be merely a rhetorical flourish and take away the real sense. It would be easy in several ways to avoid the two "it's" coming together but the direct force would be lost. I think a comma at "it" and the slight pause it would bring in the reading would be sufficient. For instance, one could write "no part it took", instead of "it took no part" but the direct force I want would be lost. (1948)

* * *

Miltonism? Surely not. The Miltonic has a statelier more spreading rhythm and a less direct more loftily arranged language. Miltonically I should have written not

The gods above and Nature sole below
Were the spectators of that mighty strife†

but

Only the Sons of Heaven and that executive She
Watched the arbitrament of the high dispute.

(1936)

* * *

I take upon myself the right to coin new words. "Immensitudes" in

And driven by a pointing hand of light
Across his soul's unmapped immensitudes‡

is not any more fantastic than "infinitudes" to pair "infinity"... Use "eternitudes"? Not likely! I would think of the French *"éternuer"* and sneeze. (1936)

* * *

"Flasque", in

Knowledge was rebuilt from cells of inference
Into a fixed body flasque and perishable.§

is a French word meaning "slack," "loose", "flaccid", etc. I have more than once tried to thrust in a French word like this, for instance: "A harlot empress in a bouge"—somewhat after the manner of Eliot and Ezra Pound. (1946)

* * *

"Its *passive* flower of love and doom it gave"? Good heavens! how did Gandhi come in there? Passion-flower, sir—passion, *not* passive.** (1936)

* * *

* The reply is to: "Would it be an improvement if one of the two successive 'its' in

In the world which sprang from it it took no part

is avoided? Why not put something like 'its depths' for the first 'it'?" Vol. I. p. 258.

†Vol. I. p. 14. In the present version, "Nature sole" has been changed to "Nature's Soul."

‡ Vol. I. p. 73. § Vol. I. p. 244. ** Vol. I. p. 8.

"Lulling" will never do. It is too ornamental and romantic and tender. I have put "slumber" in its place.*

* * *

I do not think the word "Panergy" in

A Panergy that harmonised all life

depends for its meaning on the word "energies" in a previous line,

A million energies joined and were the One.

The "Panergy" suggested is a self-existent total power which may carry the cosmic energies in it and is their cause but is not constituted by them.† **(1948)**

* * *

"To blend and blur shades owing to technical exigencies" might be all right for mental poetry—it won't do for what I am trying to create—in that, one word *won't* do for the other. Even in mental poetry I consider it an inferior method. "Gleam" and "glow" are two quite different things and the poet who uses them indifferently has constantly got his eye upon words rather than upon the object. (1937)

* * *

In the lines—

A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane‡—

no word will do except "invisible." I don't think there are too many "l's"—in fact such multiplications of a vowel or consonant assonance or several together as well as syllabic assonances in a single line or occasionally between line-endings (e.g. face-fate) are an accepted feature of the technique in *Savitri*. (1936)

* * *

In

The incertitude of man's proud confident thought,§

"uncertainty" instead of "incertitude" would mean that the thought was confident but uncertain of itself, which would be a contradiction. "Incertitude" means that its truth is uncertain in spite of its proud confidence in itself. (1936)

* * *

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*The suggestion offered to Sri Aurobindo was: "Your line,

In a stillness of the voices of the world,

is separated by twenty lines from

In the formless force and the still fixity.

So there is no fault here in 'stillness', but an added poetic quality might come if 'stillness' is avoided and some such word as 'lulling' is used, especially as the line before runs:

And cradles of heavenly rapture and repose."

Vol. I. pp. 267, 268.

† The point raised was: "That 'Panergy' is a fine coinage, but, by following the word 'energies' in the third line before it, does it not become a little bit obvious, losing its mysterious suggestion? I dare say 'energies' helps to make it clear, but is it necessary to prepare it? Will not a better effect be produced by springing it suddenly upon the reader, preparing it only indirectly by using some synonym for 'energies' in the other line?" Vol. I. p. 273. ‡ Vol. I. p. 6. §Vol. I. p. 71.

In the two passages ending with the same word "alone"* I think there is sufficient space between them and neither ear nor mind need be offended. In

All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone,

the word "sole" would flatten the line too much and the word "aloof" would here have no atmosphere and it would not express the idea. It is not distance and aloofness that has to be stressed but uncompanioned solitude. (1946)

* * *

The line is:

The calm immunity of spirit Space.

"Immunities" in the plural is much feebler and philosophically abstract —one begins to think of things like "quantities"—naturally it suggested itself to me as keeping up the plural sequence—

The golden plateaus of immortal Fire,
The moon-flame oceans of unfallen Bliss—

but it grated on the sense of spiritual objective reality and I had to reject it at once. The calm immunity was a thing I could at once feel. With immunities the mind has to ask: "Well, what are they?"† (1937)

* * *

In the line—

Draped in the leaves' vivid emerald monotone‡—

the first foot is taken as a dactyl. A little gambol like that must be occasionally allowed in an otherwise correct metrical performance. (1936)

* * *

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* Vol. I. p. 31:

There knowing herself by her own termless self,
Wisdom supernal, wordless, absolute
Sat uncompanioned in the eternal Calm,
All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone.

With a gap of 61 lines occurs the passage (p. 32):

The superconscient realms of motionless peace
Where judgment ceases and the word is mute
And the Unconceived lies pathless and alone.

The point raised was that, though "alone" was very fine in both cases, the occurrence of both in the context of a particular single whole of spiritual experience might slightly blunt for the reader the revelatory edge in the second case.

† The line originally was:

The calm immensities of spirit Space.

Owing to the close occurrence of the word "immensities" in another line, "immunity" was here used. At present the original word has been restored in a new context (Vol. I. p. 44) and the line comes at the end instead of at the beginning of the sequence:

Still regions of imperishable Light,
All-seeing eagle-peaks of silent Power
And moon-flame oceans of swift fathomless Bliss
And calm immensities of spirit Space.

‡Vol. I. p. 14.

The best way to scan

Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible—*

will be to spell "fallen" "fall'n" as is occasionally done and treat "bliss into" as a dactyl. (1946)

* * *

The line—

This truth broke in in a triumph of fire†—

to which you object on account of forced rhythm in the phrase, "in a triumph," has not been so arranged through negligence. It was very deliberately done and deliberately maintained. If it were altered the whole effect of rhythmic meaning and suggestion which I intended would be lost and the alterations you suggest would make a good line perhaps but with an ordinary and inexpressive rhythm. Obviously this is not a "natural rhythm," but there is no objection to its being forced when it is a forcible and violent action that has to be suggested. The rhythm cannot be called artificial, for that would mean something not true and genuine or significant but only patched up and insincere: the rhythm here is a turn of art and not a manufacture. The scansion is iamb, reversed spondee, pyrrhic trochee, iamb. By reversed spondee I mean a foot with the first syllable long and highly stressed and the second stressed but short or with a less heavy ictus. In the ordinary spondee the greater ictus is on the second syllable while there are equal spondees with two heavy stresses, e.g. "vast spaces" or in such a line as

He has seized life in his resistless hands.

In the first part of the line on which you comment the rhythm is appropriate to the violent breaking in of the truth while in the second half it expresses a high exultation and exaltation in the inrush. This is brought out by the two long and highly stressed vowels in the first syllable of "triumph" and in the word "fire" (which in the elocution of the line have to be given their full force), coming after the pyrrhic with two short syllables between them. If one slurs over the slightly weighted short syllable in "triumph" where the concluding consonants exercise a certain check and delay in the voice, one could turn this half line into a very clumsy double anapaest, the first a glide and the second a stumble; this would be bad elocution and contrary to the natural movement of the words.

Certainly, Milton in the lines you quote——

And they bowed down to the Gods of their wives,

and

Burned after them to the bottomless pit—

had a rhythmical effect in mind; he was much too careful and conscientious a metrist and much too consummate a master of rhythm to do anything carelessly or without good reason. If he found his inspiration stumbling or becoming slipshod in its rhythmical effects, he would have corrected it. (1946)

* * *

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*Vol. I. p. 201. ‡Vol. I. p. 21.

As to the exact identity in the first half of the two lines ending the passage—

Even were caught as through a cunning veil
The smile of love that sanctions the long game,
The calm indulgence and maternal breasts
Of Wisdom suckling the child-laughter of Chance,
Silence the nurse of the Almighty's power,
The omniscient hush, womb of the immortal Word,
And of the Timeless the still brooding face,
*And the creative eye of Eternity**—

it was certainly intentional, if by intention is meant not a manufacture by my personal mind but the spontaneous deliberateness of the inspiration which gave the lines to me and an acceptance in the receiving mind. The first halves of the two lines are metrically identical closely associating together the two things seen as of the same order, the still Timeless and the dynamic creative Eternity both of them together originating the manifest world: the latter halves of the lines diverge altogether, one into the slow massiveness of the "still brooding Face" with its strong close, the other into the combination of two high and emphatic syllables with an indeterminate run of short syllables between and after, allowing the line to drop away into some unuttered endlessness rather than cease. In this rhythmical significance I can see no weakness. (1946)

* * *

I do not realise what you mean by "stickiness" in

That clasped him in from day and night's pursuit,†

since there are only two hard labials and some nasals; is it that combination which makes you feel sticky, or does the addition of some hard dentals also help? Anyhow, sticky or not, I am unwilling to change anything.

I do not want to put "day's" and "night's"; I find it heavy and unnecessary. It ought to be clear enough to the reader that "day and night" are here one double entity or two hounds in a leash pursuing a common prey. (1948)

* * *

I find nothing pompous or bombastic in the line—

Travestied with a fortuitous sovereignty‡—

unless it is the resonance of the word "fortuitous" and the many closely packed "t's" that give you the impression. But "fortuitous" cannot be sacrificed as it exactly hits the meaning I want. Also I fail to see what is abstract and especially mental in it. Neither a travesty nor sovereignty are abstract things and the images here are all concrete, as they should

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* Vol. I. p. 39. † Vol. I. p. 263. ‡Vol. I. p. 260.

be to express the inner vision's sense of concreteness of subtle things. The whole passage is, of course, about mental movements and mental powers, therefore about what the intellect sees as abstraction, but the inner vision does not feel them as that. To it mind has a substance and its energies and actions are very real and substantial things. Naturally there is a certain sense of scorn in this passage, for what the Ignorance regards as its sovereignty and positive truth has been exposed by the "sceptic ray" as fortuitous and unreal. (1948)

* * *

The cliché you object to—"he quoted Scripture and Law"*—was put in there with fell purpose and was necessary for the effect I wanted to produce, the more direct its commonplace the better. However, I defer to your objection and have altered it to:

He armed untruth with Scripture and the Law.

I don't remember seeing a phrase like

Agreeing on the right to disagree†

anywhere in a newspaper or in any book either; colloquial it is and perhaps for that reason only out of harmony in this passage. So I substitute:

Only they agreed to differ in Evil's paths. (1946)

* * *

I still consider the line—

The body and the life no more were all—

a very good one and it did perfectly express what I wanted to say. I don't see how I could have said it otherwise without diminishing or exaggerating the significance. As for "baldness," an occasionally bare and straightforward line without any trailing of luminous robes is not an improper element. E.g.

This was the day when Satyavan must die,

which I would not remove from its position even if you were to give me the crown and income of the *Kavi Samrat* for doing it. If I have changed here, it is because the alteration all round it made the line no longer in harmony with its immediate environment.

It was not bareness for bareness's sake but bareness for expression's sake, which is a different matter... It was "*juste*" for expressing what I had to say then in a certain context. The context being entirely changed in its sense, bearing and atmosphere, it was no longer *juste* in that place. Its being an interloper in a new house does not show that it was an interloper in an old one. The colours and the spaces being heightened and widened, this tint which was appropriate and needed in the old design could not remain in the new one. These things are a question of design;

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* Vol. I. p. 189.
† Vol. I. p. 190.

a line has to be seen not only in its own separate value but with a view to its just place in the whole.* (1937)

* * *

I have wholly failed to feel the poetic flatness of which you accuse the line,

All he had been and all that now he was.

No doubt, the diction is extremely simple, direct and unadorned but that can be said of numberless good lines in poetry and even of some great lines. If there is style, if there is a balanced rhythm (rhyme is not necessary) and a balanced language and significance (for these two elements combined always create a good style), and if the line or the passage in which it occurs has some elevation or profundity or other poetic quality in the idea which it expresses, then there cannot be any flatness nor can any such line or passage be set aside as prosaic. (1946)

* * *

Your new objection to the line,

All he had been and all that now he was,

is somewhat self-contradictory. If a line has a rhythm and expressive turn which makes it poetic, then it must be good poetry; but I suppose what you mean is fine or elevated poetry. I would say that my line is good poetry and is further uplifted by rising towards its subsequent context which gives it its full poetic meaning and suggestion, the evolution of the inner being and the abrupt end or failure of all that had been done unless it could suddenly transcend itself and become something greater. I do not think that this line in its context is merely passable, but I admit that it is less elevated and intense than what precedes or what follows. I do not see how that can be avoided without truncating the thought significance of the whole account by the omission of something necessary to its evolution or else overpitching the expression where it needs to be direct or clear and bare in its lucidity. In any case the emended version—"All he had been

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* The passage originally stood:

A cosmic vision looked at things through light:
Atomic now the shapes that loomed so large.
Illusion lost her aggrandising lens:
The body and the life no more were all,
The mind itself was only an outer court,
His soul the tongue of an unmeasured fire.

The passage then became:

A cosmic vision looked at things through light:
Illusion lost her aggrandising lens,
Atomic were her shapes that loomed so large
And from her failing hand her measures fell:
In the enormous spaces of the Self
The living form seemed now a wandering shell;
Earth was one room in his million-mansioned house,
The mind a many-frescoed outer court,
His soul the tongue of an unmeasured fire.

At present some of the lines have changed places in the poem and the passage as it stands on page 75 of Vol. I is not quite the same.

and all towards which he grew"* cures any possibility of the line being merely passable as it raises both the idea and the expression through the vividness of image which makes us feel and not merely think the living evolution in Aswapathy's inner being.

As for the line,

All in her pointed to a nobler kind,†

I refuse entirely to admit that that is poor poetry. It is not only just the line that is needed to introduce what follows but it is very good poetry with the strength and pointed directness, not intellectualised like Pope's, but intuitive, which we often find in the Elizabethans, for instance in Marlowe supporting adequately and often more than adequately his "mighty lines". But the image must be understood, as it was intended, in its concrete sense and not as a vague rhetorical phrase substituted for a plainer wording,—it shows Savitri as the forerunner or first creator of a new race. All poets have lines which are bare and direct statements and meant to be that in order to carry their full force; but to what category their simplicity belongs or whether a line is only passable or more than that depends on various circumstances. Shakespeare's

To be or not to be, that is the question

introduces powerfully one of the most famous of all soliloquies and it comes in with a great dramatic force, but in itself it is a bare statement and some might say that it would not be otherwise written in prose and is only saved by the metrical rhythm. The same might be said of the well-known passage in Keats which I have already quoted:

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

The same might be said of Milton's famous line,

Fall'n Cherub! to be weak is miserable.

But obviously in all these lines there is not only a concentrated force, power or greatness of the thought, but also a concentration of intense poetic feeling which makes any criticism impossible. Then take Milton's lines,

Were it not better done, as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

It might be said that the first line has nothing to distinguish it and is merely passable or only saved by the charm of what follows; but there is a beauty of rhythm and a *bhava* or feeling brought in by the rhythm which makes the line beautiful in itself and not merely passable. If there is not some saving grace like that, then the danger of laxity may become possible. I do not think there is much in *Savitri* which is of that kind. But I can perfectly understand your anxiety that all should be lifted to or towards

* Vol. I. p. 278. The emendation was made because Sri Aurobindo felt that the new line said more fully and accurately what he should at that place.

† Vol. I. p. 15.

at least the minimum overhead level or so near as to be touched by its influence or at the very least a good substitute for it. I do not know whether that is always possible in so long a poem as *Savitri* dealing with so many various heights and degrees and so much varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative. But that has been my general aim throughout and it is the reason why I have made so many successive drafts and continual alterations till I felt that I had got the thing intended by the higher inspiration in every line and passage. It is also why I keep myself open to every suggestion from a sympathetic and understanding quarter and weigh it well, rejecting only after due consideration and accepting when I see it to be well-founded. But for that the critic must be one who has seen and felt what is in the thing written, not like your friend who has not seen anything and understood only the word surface and not even always that; he must be open to this kind of poetry, able to see the spiritual vision it conveys, capable too of feeling the Overhead touch when it comes,—the fit reader. (1947)

9

Something more might need to be said in regard to the Overhead note in poetry and the Overmind aesthesis;* but these are exactly the subjects on which it is difficult to write with any precision or satisfy the intellect's demand for clear and positive statement.

I do not know that it is possible for me to say why I regard one line or passage as having the Overhead touch or the Overhead note while another misses it. When I said that in the lines

I spoke as one who ne'er would speak again
And as a dying man to dying men

the touch came in through some intense passion and sincerity in the writer, I was simply mentioning the psychological door through which the thing came. I did not mean to suggest that such passion and sincerity could of itself bring in the touch or that they constituted the Overhead

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* In the letter to whose several questions Sri Aurobindo has here replied, the point raised on the subject of Overmind aesthesis, apropos his previous remarks on it (see section 3), may be summarised thus:

"Although it is plain that ordinary aesthesis cannot be equated with the Overmind's poetry in which Truth is the main concern, is not that poetry what it is because of an extraordinary type of aesthetics and not because it is concerned with Truth? There are in poetry many other factors than aesthesis; each plane may have its characteristic factor, as the Overmind has Truth; but these factors can exist without necessarily producing poetry, while no poetry at all can there be either of the Overhead or of the non-Overhead variety in the absence of aesthesis. If the poetic expressions from the diverse planes are to be brought under a general heading, the common factor in them must be considered their essence, and what else than a many-moded aesthesis can be this factor? The Overmind's presence in 'Savitri' assures the presence of Truth in it, but shall we have poetry proper if we knock out of it the Overmind aesthesis which you have called 'a greater, wider and deeper aesthesis which can answer to the transcendent and feel too whatever of the transcendent or spiritual enters into the things of life, mind and sense'?

"Here a new question crops up: when you employ the epithets 'greater, wider, deeper', what exactly are we to understand in relation to poetic quality? If poetry's essence is some kind or other of aesthesis, is the Overmind poetry superior, **qua** poetry, to the creations of the Muse from the mental, vital or subtle-physical planes? The epithets used by you seem at first sight to imply superiority for it. But I believe they refer to the spiritually greater, wider and deeper nature of the plane from which this poetry leaps out. In other words, the Overmind aesthesis functions from the plane of the transcendent or spiritual which is more great, wide and deep than the rest of the planes, yet in thus functioning it produces not superior poetry but poetry from a level of being which has spiritual superiority—a superiority that does not add to the purely poetic quality. I don't suppose this quality is at all affected by either the plane or the scope or the theme of a poetic creation. But what then constitutes greatness from the standpoint of poetry proper? Is it not a certain difference of intensity that, irrespective of plane or scope or theme, makes one passage greater than another, though both may have perfection of beauty in their own ways? In other words: there is only a gradation of 'temperatures'. The inner being, poetically creating from a lower 'temperature', produces small though perfect beauty, brings an aesthesis that for all its flawless work is narrow in its thrill—from a higher 'temperature' a beauty that is great, a far-thrilling aesthesis."

note in the lines. I am afraid I have to say what Arnold said about the grand style; it has to be felt and cannot be explained or accounted for. One has an intuitive feeling, a recognition of something familiar to one's experience or one's deeper perception in the substance and the rhythm or in one or the other which rings out and cannot be gainsaid. One might put forward a theory or a description of what the Overhead character of the line consists in, but it is doubtful whether any such mentally constructed definition could be always applicable. You speak, for instance, of the sense of the Infinite and the One which is pervasive in the Overhead planes; that need not be explicitly there in the Overhead poetic expression or in the substance of any given line: it can be expressed indeed by Overhead poetry as no other can express it, but this poetry can deal with quite other things. I would certainly say that Shakespeare's lines

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

have the Overhead touch in the substance, the rhythm and the feeling; but Shakespeare is not giving us here the sense of the One and the Infinite. He is, as in the other lines of his which have this note, dealing as he always does with life, with vital emotions and reactions or the thoughts that spring out in the life-mind under the pressure of life. It is not any strict adhesion to a transcendental view of things that constitutes this kind of poetry, but something behind not belonging to the mind or the vital and physical consciousness and with that a certain quality or power in the language and the rhythm which helps to bring out that deeper something. If I had to select the line in European poetry which most suggests an almost direct descent from the Overmind consciousness there might come first Virgil's line about the "touch of tears in mortal things.:"

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

Another might be Shakespeare's

In the dark backward and abysm of Time

or again Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

We might also add Wordsworth's line

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

There are other lines ideative and more emotional or simply descriptive which might be added, such as Marlowe's

Is this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

If we could extract and describe the quality and the subtle something that mark the language and rhythm and feeling of these lines and underlie their substance we might attain hazardously to some mental understanding of the nature of Overhead poetry.

The Overmind is not strictly a transcendental consciousness—that epithet would more accurately apply to the Supramental and to the Sachchidananda consciousness—though it looks up to the transcendental and may receive something from it and though it does transcend the ordinary human mind and in its full and native self-power, when it does not lean down and become part of mind, is superconscient to us. It is more properly a cosmic consciousness, even the very base of the cosmic as we perceive, understand or feel it. It stands behind every particular in the cosmos and is the source of all our mental, vital or physical actualities and possibilities which are diminished and degraded derivations and variations from it and have not, except in certain formations and activities of genius and some intense self-exceeding, anything of the native Overmind quality and power. Nevertheless, because it stands behind as if covered by a veil, something of it can break through or shine through or even only dimly glimmer through and that brings the Overmind touch or note. We cannot get this touch frequently unless we have torn the veil, made a gap in it or rent it largely away and seen the very face of what is beyond, lived in the light of it or established some kind of constant intercourse. Or we can draw upon it from time to time without ever ascending into it if we have established a line of communication between the higher and the ordinary consciousness. What comes down may be very much diminished but it has something of that. The ordinary reader of poetry who has not that experience will usually not be able to distinguish but would at the most feel that here is something extraordinarily fine, profound, sublime, or unusual,—or he might turn away from it as something too high-pitched and excessive; he might even speak depreciatingly of "purple passages", rhetoric, exaggeration or excess. One who had the line of communication open could on the other hand feel what is there and distinguish even if he could not adequately characterise or describe it. The essential character is perhaps that there is something behind of which I have already spoken and which comes not primarily from the mind or the vital emotion or the physical seeing but from the cosmic self and its consciousness standing behind them all and things then tend to be seen not as the mind or heart or body sees them but as this greater consciousness feels or sees or answers to them. In the direct Overmind transmission this something behind is usually forced to the front or close to the front by a combination of words which carries the suggestion of a deeper meaning or by the force of an image or, most of all, by an intonation and a rhythm which carry up the depths in their wide wash or long march or mounting surge. Sometimes it is left lurking behind and only suggested so that a subtle feeling of what is not actually expressed is needed if the reader is not to miss it. This is oftenest the case when there is just a touch or note pressed upon something that would be otherwise only of a mental, vital or physical poetic value and nothing of the body of the Overhead power shows itself through the veil,

but at most a tremor and vibration, a gleam or a glimpse. In the lines I have chosen there is always an unusual quality in the rhythm, as prominently in Virgil's line, often in the very building and constantly in the intonation and the association of the sounds which meet in the line and find themselves linked together by a sort of inevitable felicity. There is also an inspired selection or an unusual bringing together of words which has the power to force a deeper sense on the mind as in Virgil's

Sunt lacrimae rerum.

One can note that this line if translated straight into English would sound awkward and clumsy as would many of the finest lines in Rig Veda; that is precisely because they are new and felicitous turns in the original language, discoveries of an unexpected and absolute phrase; they defy translation. If you note the combination of words and sounds in Shakespeare's line

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

so arranged as to force on the mind and still more on the subtle nerves and sense the utter absoluteness of the difficulty and pain of living for the soul that has awakened to the misery of the world, you can see how this technique works. Here and elsewhere the very body and soul of the thing seen or felt come out into the open. The same dominant characteristic can be found in other lines which I have not cited,—in Leopardi's

Insano indegno mistero delle cose
(The insane and ignoble mystery of things)

or in Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.

Milton's line lives by its choice of the word "wander" to collocate with "through eternity"; if he had chosen any other word, it would no longer have been an Overhead line, even if the surface sense had been exactly the same. On the other hand, take Shelley's stanza—

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

This is perfect poetry with the most exquisite melody and beauty of wording and an unsurpassable poignancy of pathos, but there is no touch or note of the Overhead inspiration: it is the mind and the heart, the vital emotion, working at their highest pitch under the stress of a psychic inspiration. The rhythm is of the same character, a direct, straightforward, lucid and lucent movement welling out limpidly straight from the psychic source. The same characteristics are found in another short lyric of Shelley's which is perhaps the purest example of the psychic inspiration in English

poetry:

I can give not what men call love;
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the Heavens reject not,—
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?

We have again extreme poetic beauty there, but nothing of the Overhead note.

In the other lines I have cited it is really the Overmind language and rhythm that have been to some extent transmitted; but of course all Overhead poetry is not from the Overmind, more often it comes from the Higher Thought, the Illumined Mind or the pure Intuition. This last is different from the mental intuition which is frequent enough in poetry that does not transcend the mental level. The language and rhythm from these other Overhead levels can be very different from that which is proper to the Overmind; for the Overmind thinks in a mass; its thought, feeling, vision is high or deep or wide or all these things together: to use the Vedic expression about fire, the divine messenger, it goes vast on its way to bring the divine riches, and it has a corresponding language and rhythm. The Higher Thought has a strong tread often with bare unsandaled feet and moves in a clear-cut light: a divine power, measure, dignity is its most frequent character. The outflow of the Illumined Mind comes in a flood brilliant with revealing words or a light of crowding images, sometimes surcharged with its burden of revelations, sometimes with a luminous sweep. The Intuition is usually a lightning flash showing up a single spot or plot of ground or scene with an entire and miraculous completeness of vision to the surprised ecstasy of the inner eye; its rhythm has a decisive inevitable sound which leaves nothing essential unheard, but very commonly is embodied in a single stroke. These, however, are only general or dominant characters; any number of variations is possible. There are besides mingled inspirations, several levels meeting and combining or modifying each other's notes, and an Overmind transmission can contain or bring with it all the rest, but how much of this description will be to the ordinary reader of poetry at all intelligible or clearly identifiable?

There are besides in mental poetry derivations or substitutes for all these styles. Milton's "grand style" is such a substitute for the manner of the Higher Thought. Take it anywhere at its ordinary level or in its higher elevation, there is always or almost always that echo there:

Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree

or

On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues

or

Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

Shakespeare's poetry coruscates with a play of the hues of imagination which we may regard as a mental substitute for the inspiration of the Illumined Mind and sometimes by aiming at an exalted note he links on to the illumined Overhead inspiration itself as in the lines I have more than once quoted:

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the shipboy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge?

But the rest of that passage falls away in spite of its high-pitched language and resonant rhythm far below the Overhead strain. So it is easy for the mind to mistake and take the higher for the lower inspiration or *vice versa*. Thus Milton's lines might at first sight be taken because of a certain depth of emotion in their large lingering rhythm as having the Overhead complexion, but this rhythm loses something of its sovereign right because there are no depths of sense behind it. It conveys nothing but the noble and dignified pathos of the blindness and old age of a great personality fallen into evil days. Milton's architecture of thought and verse is high and powerful and massive, but there are usually no subtle echoes there, no deep chambers: the occult things in man's being are foreign to his intelligence,—for it is in the light of the poetic intelligence that he works. He does not stray into "the mystic cavern of the heart," does not follow the inner fire entering like a thief with the Cow of Light into the secrecy of secrecies. Shakespeare does sometimes get in as if by a splendid psychic accident in spite of his preoccupation with the colours and shows of life.

I do not know therefore whether I can speak with any certainty about the lines you quote; I would perhaps have to read them in their context first, but it seems to me that there is just a touch, as in the lines about the dying man. The thing that is described there may have happened often enough in times like those of the recent wars and upheavals and in times of violent strife and persecution and catastrophe, but the greatness of the experience does not come out or not wholly, because men feel with the mind and heart and not with the soul; but here there is by some accident of wording and rhythm a suggestion of something behind, of the greatness of the soul's experience and its courageous acceptance of the tragic, the final, the fatal—and its resistance; it is only just a suggestion, but it is enough: the Overhead has touched and passed back to its heights. There is something very different but of the same essential calibre in the line you quote:

Sad eyes watch for feet that never come

It is still more difficult to say anything very tangible about the Overmind aesthesis. When I wrote about it I was thinking of the static aesthesis that perceives and receives rather than of the dynamic aesthesis which creates; I was not thinking at all of superior or inferior grades of poetic greatness or beauty. If the complete Overmind power or even that of the lower Overhead planes could come down into the mind and entirely transform its action, then no doubt there might be greater poetry written than any that man has yet achieved, just as a greater superhuman life might be created if the Supermind could come down wholly into life and lift life wholly into itself and transform it. But what happens at present is that something comes down and accepts to work under the law of the mind and with a mixture of the mind and it must be judged by the laws and standards of the mind. It brings in new tones, new colours, new elements, but it does not change radically as yet the stuff of the consciousness with which we labour.

Whether it produces great poetry or not depends on the extent to which it manifests its power and overrides rather than serves the mentality which it is helping. At present it does not do that sufficiently to raise the work to the full greatness of the worker.

And then what do you mean exactly by greatness in poetry? One can say that Virgil is greater than Catullus and that many of Virgil's lines are greater than anything Catullus ever achieved. But poetical perfection is not the same thing as poetical greatness. Virgil is perfect at his best, but Catullus too is perfect at his best: even each has a certain exquisiteness of perfection, each in his own kind. Virgil's kind is large and deep, that of Catullus sweet and intense. Virgil's art reached or had from its beginning a greater and more constant ripeness than that of Catullus. We can say then that Virgil was a greater poet and artist of word and rhythm but we cannot say that his poetry, at his best, was more perfect poetry and that of Catullus less perfect. That renders futile many of the attempts at comparison like Arnold's comparison of Wordsworth's *Skylark* with Shelley's. You may say that Milton was a greater poet than Blake, but there can always be people, not aesthetically insensitive, who would prefer Blake's lyrical work to Milton's grander achievement, and there are certainly things in Blake which touch deeper chords than the massive hand of Milton could ever reach. So all poetic superiority is not summed up in the word greatness. Each kind has its own best which escapes from comparison and stands apart in its own value.

Let us then leave for the present the question of poetic greatness or superiority aside and come back to the Overmind aesthesis. By aesthesis is meant a reaction of the consciousness, mental and vital and even bodily, which receives a certain element in things, something that can be called their taste, Rasa, which, passing through the mind or

sense or both, awakes a vital enjoyment of the taste, Bhoga, and this can again awaken us, awaken even the soul in us to something yet deeper and more fundamental than mere pleasure and enjoyment, to some form of the spirit's delight of existence, Ananda. Poetry, like all art, serves the seeking for these things, this aesthesis, this Rasa, Bhoga, Ananda; it brings us a Rasa of word and sound but also of the idea and, through the idea, of the things expressed by the word and sound and thought, a mental or vital or sometimes the spiritual image of their form, quality, impact upon us or even, if the poet is strong enough, of their world-essence, their cosmic reality, the very soul of them, the spirit that resides in them as it resides in all things. Poetry may do more than this, but this at least it must do to however small an extent or it is not poetry. Aesthesis therefore is of the very essence of poetry, as it is of all art. But it is not the sole element and aesthesis too is not confined to a reception of poetry and art; it extends to everything in the world: there is nothing we can sense, think or in any way experience to which there cannot be an aesthetic reaction of our conscious being. Ordinarily, we suppose that aesthesis is concerned with beauty, and that indeed is its most prominent concern: but it is concerned with many other things also. It is the universal Ananda that is the parent of aesthesis and the universal Ananda takes three major and original forms, beauty, love and delight, the delight of all existence, the delight in things, in all things. Universal Ananda is the artist and creator of the universe witnessing, experiencing and taking joy in its creation. In the lower consciousness it creates its opposites, the sense of ugliness as well as the sense of beauty, hate and repulsion and dislike as well as love and attraction and liking, grief and pain as well as joy and delight; and between these dualities or as a grey tint in the background there is a general tone of neutrality and indifference born from the universal insensibility into which the Ananda sinks in its dark negation in the Inconscient. All this is the sphere of aesthesis, its dullest reaction is indifference, its highest is ecstasy. Ecstasy is a sign of a return towards the original or supreme Ananda: that art or poetry is supreme which can bring us something of the supreme tone of ecstasy. For as the consciousness sinks from the supreme levels through various degrees towards the Inconscience the general sign of this descent is an always diminishing power of its intensity, intensity of being, intensity of consciousness, intensity of force, intensity of the delight in things and the delight in existence. So too as we ascend towards the supreme level, these intensities increase. As we climb beyond Mind, higher and wider values replace the values of our limited mind, life and bodily consciousness. Aesthesis shares in this intensification of capacity. The capacity for pleasure and pain, for liking and disliking is comparatively poor on the level of our mind and life; our capacity for ecstasy is brief and limited; these tones arise from a general ground of neutrality which is always

dragging them back towards itself. As it enters the Overhead planes the ordinary aesthesis turns into a pure delight and becomes capable of a high or large or deep abiding ecstasy. The ground is no longer a general neutrality, but a pure spiritual ease and happiness upon which the special tones of the aesthetic consciousness come out or from which they arise. This is the first fundamental change.

Another change in this transition is a turn towards universality in place of the isolations, the conflicting generalities, the mutually opposing dualities of the lower consciousness. In the Overmind we have a first firm foundation of the experience of a universal beauty, a universal love, a universal delight. These things can come on the mental and vital plane even before those planes are directly touched or influenced by the spiritual consciousness; but they are there a temporary experience and not permanent or they are limited in their field and do not touch the whole being. They are a glimpse and not a change of vision or a change of nature. The artist for instance can look at things only plain or shabby or ugly or even repulsive to the ordinary sense and see in them and bring out of them beauty and the delight that goes with beauty. But this is a sort of special grace for the artistic consciousness and is limited within the field of his art. In the Overhead consciousness, especially in the Overmind, these things become more and more the law of the vision and the law of the nature. Wherever the Overmind spiritual man turns he sees a universal beauty touching and uplifting all things, expressing itself through them, moulding them into a field or objects of its divine aesthesis; a universal love goes out from him to all beings; he feels the Bliss which has created the worlds and upholds them and all that is expresses to him the universal delight, is made of it, is a manifestation of it and moulded into its image. This universal aesthesis of beauty and delight does not ignore or fail to understand the differences and oppositions, the gradations, the harmony and disharmony obvious to the ordinary consciousness; but, first of all, it draws a Rasa from them and with that comes the enjoyment, Bhoga, and the touch or the mass of the Ananda. It sees that all things have their meaning, their value, their deeper or total significance which the mind does not see, for the mind is only concerned with a surface vision, surface contacts and its own surface reactions. When something expresses perfectly what it was meant to express, the completeness brings with it a sense of harmony, a sense of artistic perfection; it gives even to what is discordant a place in a system of cosmic concordances and the discords become part of a vast harmony, and wherever there is harmony, there is a sense of beauty. Even in form itself, apart from the significance, the Overmind consciousness sees the object with a totality which changes its effect on the percipient even while it remains the same thing. It sees lines and masses and an underlying design which the physical eye does not see and which

escapes even the keenest mental vision. Every form becomes beautiful to it in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us. The Overmind looks also straight at and into the soul of each thing and not only at its form or its significance to the mind or to the life; this brings to it not only the true truth of the thing but the delight of it. It sees also the one spirit in all, the face of the Divine everywhere and there can be no greater Ananda than that; it feels oneness with all, sympathy, love, the bliss of the Brahman. In a highest, a most integral experience it sees all things as if made of existence, consciousness, power, bliss, every atom of them charged with and constituted of Sachchidananda. In all this the Overmind aesthesis takes its share and gives its response; for these things come not merely as an idea in the mind or a truth-seeing but as an experience of the whole being and a total response is not only possible but above a certain level imperative.

I have said that aesthesis responds not only to what we call beauty and beautiful things but to all things. We make a distinction between truth and beauty; but there can be an aesthetic response to truth also, a joy in its beauty, a love created by its charm, a rapture in the finding, a passion in the embrace, an aesthetic joy in its expression, a satisfaction of love in the giving of it to others. Truth is not merely a dry statement of facts or ideas to or by the intellect; it can be a splendid discovery, a rapturous revelation, a thing of beauty that is a joy for ever. The poet also can be a seeker and lover of truth as well as a seeker and lover of beauty. He can feel a poetic and aesthetic joy in the expression of the true as well as in the expression of the beautiful. He does not make a mere intellectual or philosophical statement of the truth; it is his vision of its beauty, its power, his thrilled reception of it, his joy in it that he tries to convey by an utmost perfection in word and rhythm. If he has the passion, then even a philosophical statement of it he can surcharge with this sense of power, force, light, beauty. On certain levels of the Overmind, where the mind element predominates over the element of gnosis, the distinction between truth and beauty is still valid. It is indeed one of the chief functions of the Overmind to separate the main powers of the consciousness and give to each its full separate development and satisfaction, bring out its utmost potency and meaning, its own soul and significant body and take it on its own way as far as it can go. It can take up each power of man and give it its full potentiality, its highest characteristic development. It can give to intellect its austerest intellectuality and to logic its most sheer unsparing logicality. It can give to beauty its most splendid passion of luminous form and the consciousness that receives it a supreme height and depth of ecstasy. It can create a sheer and pure poetry impossible for the intellect to sound to its depths or wholly grasp, much less to mentalise and analyse. It is the function

of Overmind to give to every possibility its full potential, its own separate kingdom. But also there is another action of Overmind which sees and thinks and creates in masses, which reunites separated things, which reconciles opposites. On that level truth and beauty not only become constant companions but become one, involved in each other, inseparable: on that level the true is always beautiful and the beautiful is always true. Their highest fusion perhaps only takes place in the Supermind; but Overmind on its summits draws enough of the supramental light to see what the Supermind sees and do what the Supermind does though in a lower key and with a less absolute truth and power. On an inferior level Overmind may use the language of the intellect to convey as far as that language can do it its own greater meaning and message but on its summits Overmind uses its own native language and gives to its truths their own supreme utterance, and no intellectual speech, no mentalised poetry can equal or even come near to that power and beauty. Here your intellectual dictum that poetry lives by its aesthetic quality alone and has no need of truth or that truth must depend upon aesthetics to become poetic at all, has no longer any meaning. For there truth itself is highest poetry and has only to appear to be utterly beautiful to the vision, the hearing, the sensibility of the soul. There dwells and from there springs the mystery of the inevitable word, the supreme immortal rhythm, the absolute significance and the absolute utterance.

I hope you do not feel crushed under this avalanche of metaphysical psychology; you have called it upon yourself by your questioning about the Overmind's greater, larger and deeper aesthesis. What I have written is indeed very scanty and sketchy, only some of the few essential things that have to be said; but without it I could not try to give you any glimpse of the meaning of my phrase. This greater aesthesis is inseparable from the greater truth, it is deeper because of the depth of that truth, larger by all its immense largeness. I do not expect the reader of poetry to come anywhere near to all that, he could not without being a Yogi or at least a sadhak: but just as the Overhead poetry brings some touch of a deeper power of vision and creation into the mind without belonging itself wholly to the higher reaches, so also the full appreciation of all its burden needs at least some touch of a deeper response of the mind and some touch of a deeper aesthesis. Until that becomes general the Overhead or at least the Overmind is not going to do more than to touch here and there, as it did in the past, a few lines, a few passages, or perhaps as things advance, a little more, nor is it likely to pour into our utterance its own complete power and absolute value.

I have said that Overhead poetry is not necessarily greater or more perfect than any other kind of poetry. But perhaps a subtle qualification may be made to this statement. It is true that each kind of poetical writing can reach a highest or perfect perfection in its own line and in

its own quality and what can be more perfect than a perfect perfection or can we say that one kind of absolute perfection is "greater" than another kind? What can be more absolute than the absolute? But then what do we mean by the perfection of poetry? There is the perfection of the language and there is the perfection of the word-music and the rhythm, beauty of speech and beauty of sound, but there is also the quality of the thing said which counts for something. If we consider only word and sound and what in themselves they evoke, we arrive at the application of the theory of art for art's sake to poetry. On that ground we might say that a lyric of Anacreon is as good poetry and as perfect poetry as anything in Aeschylus or Sophocles or Homer. The question of the elevation or depth or intrinsic beauty of the thing said cannot then enter into our consideration of poetry; and yet it does enter, with most of us at any rate, and is part of the aesthetic reaction even in the most "aesthetic" of critics and readers. From this point of view the elevation from which the inspiration comes may after all matter, provided the one who receives it is a fit and powerful instrument; for a great poet will do more with a lower level of the origin of inspiration than a smaller poet can do even when helped from the highest sources. In a certain sense all genius comes from Overhead; for genius is the entry or inrush of a greater consciousness into the mind or a possession of the mind by a greater power. Every operation of genius has at its back or infused within it an intuition, a revelation, an inspiration, an illumination or at the least a hint or touch or influx from some greater power or level of conscious being than those which men ordinarily possess or use. But this power has two ways of acting: in one it touches the ordinary modes of mind and deepens, heightens, intensifies or exquisitely refines their action but without changing its modes or transforming its normal character; in the other it brings down into these normal modes something of itself, something supernormal, something which one at once feels to be extraordinary and suggestive of a superhuman level. These two ways of action when working in poetry may produce things equally exquisite and beautiful, but the word "greater" may perhaps be applied, with the necessary qualifications, to the second way and its too rare poetic creation.

The greater bulk of the highest poetry belongs to the first of these two orders. In the second order there are again two or perhaps three levels; sometimes a felicitous turn or an unusual force of language or a deeper note of feeling brings in the Overhead touch. More often it is the power of the rhythm that lifts up language that is simple and common or a feeling or idea that has often been expressed and awakes something which is not ordinarily there. If one listens with the mind only or from the vital centre only, one may have a wondering admiration for the skill and beauty of woven word and sound or be struck by the happy way or the power with which the feeling or idea is expressed. But there is something more in it than that; it is this that a deeper, more inward strand of the

consciousness has seen and is speaking, and if we listen more profoundly we can get something more than the admiration and delight of the mind or Housman's thrill of the solar plexus. We can feel perhaps the Spirit of the universe lending its own depth to our mortal speech or listening from behind to some expression of itself, listening perhaps to its memories of

Old unhappy far-off things
And battles long ago

or feeling and hearing, it may be said, the vast oceanic stillness and the cry of the cuckoo

Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides

or it may enter again into Vyasa's

A void and dreadful forest ringing with the crickets' cry
Vanaṁ pratibhayam sūnyam jhillikāgaṇanināditam

or remember its call to the soul of man,

Anityam asukhaṁ lokam imam prāpya bhajasva mām
Thou who hast come to this transient and unhappy world, love and worship Me.

There is a second level on which the poetry draws into itself a fuller language of intuitive inspiration, illumination or the higher thinking and feeling. A very rich or great poetry may then emerge and many of the most powerful passages in Shakespeare, Virgil or Lucretius or the Mahabharata and Ramayana, not to speak of the Gita, the Upanishads or the Rig Veda, have this inspiration. It is a poetry "thick inlaid with patines of bright gold" or welling up in a stream of passion, beauty and force. But sometimes there comes down a supreme voice, the Overmind voice and the Overmind music and it is to be observed that the lines and passages where that happens rank among the greatest and most admired in all poetic literature. It would be therefore too much to say that the Overhead inspiration cannot bring in a greatness into poetry which could surpass the other levels of inspiration, greater even from the purely aesthetic point of view and certainly greater in the power of its substance.

A conscious attempt to write overhead poetry with a mind aware of the planes from which this inspiration comes and seeking always to ascend to those levels or bring down something from them, would probably result in a partial success; at its lowest it might attain to what I have called the first order, ordinarily it would achieve the two lower levels of the second order and in its supreme moments it might in lines and in sustained passages achieve the supreme level, something of the highest summit of its potency. But its greatest work will be to express adequately and constantly what is now only occasionally and inadequately some kind of utterance of the things above, the things beyond, the things behind the apparent world and its external or superficial happenings and phenomena.

It would not only bring in the occult in its larger and deeper ranges but the truths of the spiritual heights, the spiritual depths, the spiritual intimacies and vastnesses as also the truths of the inner mind, the inner life, an inner or subtle physical beauty and reality. It would bring in the concreteness, the authentic image, the inmost soul of identity and the heart of meaning of these things, so that it could never lack in beauty. If this could be achieved by one possessed, if not of a supreme, still of a sufficiently high and wide poetic genius, something new could be added to the domain of poetry and there would be no danger of the power of poetry beginning to fade, to fall into decadence, to fail us. It might even enter into the domain of the infinite and inexhaustible, catch some word of the Ineffable, show us revealing images which bring us near to the Reality that is secret in us and in all of which the Upanishad speaks,

> *Anejad ekam manaso javīyo nainad devā āpnuvan pūrvam arshat...*
>
> *Tad ejati tan naijati tad dūre tud u antike.*
>
> *The One unmoving is swifter than thought, the gods cannot overtake It, for It travels ever in front; It moves and It moves not, It is far away from us and It is very close.*

The gods of the Overhead planes can do much to bridge that distance and to bring out that closeness, even if they cannot altogether overtake the Reality that exceeds and transcends them. (1946)